

Blood Under a Full Moon

by Nevermore

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Summary: Epidode 1: post 'Cabin in the Woods,' this throws in a bit more of the nightlife in the World of Darkness.

Blood Under a Full Moon

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The characters of Jeffrey and Cassandra are someone else's. She never emailed me back when I asked her if it was ok to use the characters, so I assume she doesn't mind.

The character of Looks Within is a creation of Steven Wakefield, and Matt Reimer springs from the mind of Eric Bowmaster.

All of the other characters, as well as the story, are mine.

I include this little warning for the benefit of anyone who considers himself to be an overly sensitive person. There is violence presented in this story, sometimes graphically, and there are a couple of nasty words. If you have a problem with this, don't read it, and don't tell me later that you found it offensive because forewarned is forearmed. I would rate this story PG-13, maybe R. Who knows, I don't get paid to come up with actual ratings.

Special thanks go to Icy Mike Molson, who helped point out the glaring errors and deficiencies in the story, and who also put me in a position to create some of these characters, and to have some created by the other people mentioned above. I would also be remiss

in not mentioning Drahcir, without whose guidance this fairly decent final draft would not have been possible (it really needed that much work).

****Author's Note****: This fanfic is based loosely on the short-lived Fox series, "Kindred: The Embraced." Anyone who knows the White Wolf game "Vampire: The Masquerade" knows that the TV series changed some elements of the game in order to make it more marketable. I have sort of taken the main elements of the show and placed them (I feel) more firmly within White Wolf's World of Darkness. I hope you like the results of my efforts.

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BLOOD UNDER A FULL MOON

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by

Nevermore

CHAPTER 1

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I

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The leaves of the trees covering the street rustled softly as brisk October wind blew across the dark road. From his vantage point, the man could see the lights of the city below him -- San Francisco. Had he been blind, however, he would still have been aware of the proximity of the urban squalor. Even here, miles outside the city, the scent of countless individuals hung in the air, along with the pollution that their civilization inflicted upon the world. Perhaps some of the more radical views were correct, he thought. Perhaps humans were the cause of the misery in the world. After all, without humans there would be no vampires, or any of the violence that they carried with them.

It was because of the violence that he was here. An old friend had appraised him of the situation in the city months ago. The mobster Eddie Fiori, a vampire, had been killed as a result of an attempted power grab within his organization. From what he had heard of Fiori, this was no great loss. However, this led to the inevitable infighting among Eddie's clan-members within the city. It was to have been expected. After all, the Brujah were never known to be the most cohesive lot. This time it was different, however. The violence was more brutal and destructive than any recent kindred war, and it had included only the members of one clan. The Brujah, in their zealous attempt at finding a leader, had killed not only dozens of their own, but also several of humans. Included in this number were members of the Gambioni family, which had until recently been a powerful crime family. Recently, they had gone legitimate, although they were known to not be above strong-arming the competition when they felt it necessary.

Unbeknownst to the kindred, the Gambioni family was populated by Glass Walkers, a tribe of garou so called for their preference for urban areas and human companionship. It was revolting to him that a garou could descend to such pitiful depths. The wilderness was the proper environment for his kind, the werewolves—the proud defenders of the natural world. He brought his mind back into focus almost as quickly as he had let it wander. The twins of Anthony Gambioni had been marked for greatness, all had known that. Now they were dead. They had been cut down by the new Brujah primogen, Cameron, in his attempt to keep the Gambionis out of the city's underworld's struggle. Cameron had hoped that the killing would take the fight out of the family. It had. Sorrow over the loss had been so great it blanketed the normally overwhelming impulse for blood that would have followed such an act. Now the time for sorrow was over. Now the time for vengeance had come.

He looked up in the sky. The bright spot in the heavens was easy to find, the comet now coming closer and closer to the earth. Its tail was a beautiful spectacle in the dark heavens, a view that human scientists said would not reappear for another two thousand years. Turning the other way, he could now see the moon. Its bright glow had been even more obstructed in the few moments he had been standing here. The eclipse was as beautiful as he had been expecting. The prophecy was almost complete. The death of the twins, the comet, the eclipse, the formation of his pack, all had fallen into place.

His pack—at the thought of them he climbed back onto the motorcycle. It was getting late, and they would be waiting for him in Golden Gate Park. One short meeting, and then the killing would begin. He could almost taste vampire blood in his mouth. Yes, he thought, this would be an opportunity for great glory.

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II

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Inside his mansion, Julian Luna sat in front of the fire, bringing warmth to the body that had not generated its own heat for well over a hundred years. Something was disturbing him, though he could not place what it was. Normally, he would have been on the roof enjoying the progressing eclipse, but not tonight. Tonight he had no desire to watch the astral ballet that was being performed for humanity. He stood suddenly, and within three rapid strides was at the doorway, entering the hall. "Sasha," he questioned into the dark corridor. "Are you still around?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna be leaving pretty soon, though, Uncle Julian," Sasha called back from behind the heavy oak door of her room. Julian Luna's tensions eased at the sound of her voice. At least Sasha was still safe. Perhaps his feelings were just the product of an overactive imagination.

"Where are you going tonight, Sasha?" Julian asked. He knew that she would feel as if she was checking up on him, but Julian knew that this was unavoidable. Julian admitted to himself that he was, in fact, checking up on his niece, and she was smart enough to see

that.

"I'm meeting Rayce at the haven at eleven, and then we're gonna go hunting," Sasha called back. "Maybe we'll see some of the sights. You know, as long as I've been here, I still haven't seen everything there is to see." Sasha's voice held a tinge of excitement, and Julian knew all too well that it had nothing to do with the opportunity to see areas of the city that she had not yet been in. Sasha's excitement was related to the man that would be in her company that evening.

Rayce. The very mention of his name sent chills up Julian's spine. He was the newest of the Brujah, apparently an acquaintance of Cameron's from Seattle. This new Brujah was different, though. Many speculated that Cameron requested Rayce come to San Francisco in an attempt to create a mediator between himself and the prince — someone who could simultaneously understand the order that the Ventrue ruler expected, and also what the independent-minded Brujah demanded. A noble goal, Julian admitted, if that's all it had been. Julian suspected a second purpose to the presence of Rayce. He was an ill fit to the Brujah blood. Much of Rayce's past was shrouded in mystery. Indeed, Julian wondered how much even Cameron knew. One thing was certain, however, he greatly disliked Rayce being anywhere near his niece.

"Why are you spending time with Rayce again?" Julian asked, knowing that he risked causing an argument with his niece. "Where's Cash?"

Sasha finally emerged from her room, wearing a black leather mini-skirt, a black tank-top with her black leather jacket, and black leather boots that were up to her knees. Julian shook his head, disappointed in the trashy appearance that his niece embraced as being the perfect image for her. "Cash is out in the garage, waiting around to see if you'll want to be going out tonight," Sasha said, answering Julian's question. "He wasn't willing to make definite plans until he heard what you were up to, and Rayce was. Besides, I like Rayce. He's not really like the rest of the Brujah." Sasha stressed Rayce's name as she said it, knowing it irritated her uncle a slight bit. She could not understand what Julian had against the newest Brujah in the city, but she was certain that it was something unreasonable. In her opinion, unreasonableness was a recurring theme in Julian's opinions.

"Yes, I've noticed the differences in Rayce," Julian said, noting Sasha's enjoyment in irritating him. In the back of his mind, Julian said a quick prayer for the arrival of the day when Sasha would finally mature.

"You almost sound like you think being a different sort of Brujah's a bad thing," Sasha shot back, some of the playfulness leaving her voice. "Ever since they embraced me, I've been hearing about how bad the Brujah are. Now I find one that's different, and you think that's bad, too."

"There are worse things in this world than being Brujah, Sasha," Julian said, trying to calm his niece. The prince had become tired of having Sasha leave the mansion angry at him every night.

"I'm glad you don't think I'm at the absolute bottom of the barrel

then, Uncle Julian," Sasha replied, not willing to have an argument but equally unwilling to leave without getting a final jab in. Sasha quickly stormed past Julian, only a blur of black leather and hair. She had the front door opened and was almost through it when Julian was finally able to respond.

"That's not what I meant, Sasha," Julian called out, in vain. He realized she didn't hear him, but he felt the need to speak the words anyway, hoping that saying them would make him feel better. It was true, after all, that the Brujah were not the worst of the lot in the kindred world. While he admittedly held no love for the clan, he did not hate it either. He was actually indifferent to the Brujah, with the exception of the realization of what they were able to do to the peace he was holding together in the city.

Thinking of his city made him desire to see it. His uneasiness was returning, and he had a sudden need to make sure that all was as it should be. Perhaps some conversation with Caitlin would help calm his nerves. She had a particular way of looking at the world that always seemed to ease him.

Just as Julian was about to pick up the phone to dial, it began to ring. "Hello?" he asked as he lifted the phone to his ear.

"Julian, you're home." It was Caitlin. The coincidence was almost uncanny, Julian thought, but he responded without any sign of his uneasiness.

"Hello, Caitlin. What is it?"

"Well, I got my article finished earlier than I figured I would, and I put Robbie in charge for the night," Caitlin said cheerily. "I was wondering if you'd like to get together?" Julian had noticed how her tone had quickly grown cautious, as if she held no high hopes of actually getting to see him. Recently, she had become accustomed to disappointment.

"I have to admit I am a little busy," Julian replied, lying. He figured he didn't want to seem too desperate to see her. "I'll just hurry my work along, though, and I'll meet you at about midnight."

"You're sure you're not too busy?" Caitlin asked, preferring to have him say up front that a meeting was out of the question rather than have him cancel a half hour later.

"Absolutely," Julian answered, reassuring her.

"Great," Caitlin responded happily. "How about at the Haven, then?"

"You read my mind," Julian said, a rare smile appearing on his face. "See you in an hour." Julian's smile grew as he replaced the phone. Things seemed to be getting better already.

A few minutes later, Julian was in the garage, where he found Cash working on the engine to the Mercedes.

"Something wrong with the car, Cash?" Julian asked, knowing that he had not heard of any problems.

"No, just making sure it was all ok," Cash replied. "I'd hate to have the engine fail if we ever needed it."

"Well, if it's fine, then let's be going," Julian said. Cash looked at the prince and could see the excitement in Julian's eyes. He seemed almost like a child, and the unlikely mood surprised the prince's bodyguard.

"Where?" Cash asked, trying to find out what had Julian so happy. Besides the smile, it was also unusual, Cash thought, that Julian would just walk out and announce that he was leaving. The prince usually gave at least an hour's warning, so Cash would be able to send someone ahead to make sure everything was safe.

"We have to be at the Haven at midnight, but I want to see the city before that," Julian replied.

"Anywhere in particular?" Cash asked, unaccustomed to the ambiguity of Julian's plans.

"No, I just want to see it," Julian answered.

"Alright," Cash replied uncomfortably. The Gangrel held the door open, and Julian got in. Cash then went into the trunk, and removed his uzi and shotgun. Being alone guarding Julian, going God only knew where made Cash feel the need for the extra weapons.

Getting behind the wheel, he pulled slowly out of the driveway, a little voice inside his head nagging at him. Where was Sasha in such a hurry to go? More importantly, who was Sasha in such a hurry to go see?

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III

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The wind blew through Sasha's hair as she rode her motorcycle. Rayce was riding along beside her, and their friend Joey was not far behind. Joey was another of the newer Brujah that had been embraced to fill the ranks after Cameron's consolidation had left the clan decimated. Sasha looked over at Rayce and smiled, and he grinned back. Yes, she thought, this is the only time I feel completely free, and he knows it. Finally, she had found a kindred spirit within her own clan. What would this do to her relationship with Cash? She could only wonder.

The buildings around them started to become more and more decrepit. They had certainly entered one of the lower class neighborhoods, where crime was rampant and human life was not held in much esteem. This was the perfect place for the hunt, Sasha thought, as she guided her bike into an alley and pulled it to a stop. They all dismounted and continued on foot, climbing up a fire escape to the roof of an adjacent building. They would travel by way of the rooftops, seeking their prey from above, checking each of the alleys that they passed over along their way. It was not long before they found what they had been looking for — four punks, apparently getting ready to shoot up some heroin.

"Perfect," Joey grinned. "When we're done with them, we can take their drugs. We can finance the rest of our night with that stuff."

Rayce and Sasha simply looked at him in response, but nonetheless began to climb down the fire escape to the unsuspecting group below. The attack was fast, but efficient. When they were done the punks were left unconscious, to have a terrible headache the next day. As Joey stood up, wiping the last drops of blood from his lips, he noticed a shadow at the end of the alley. A woman ducked back behind the corner, but not quickly enough to escape his attention. He began to approach her, swaggering with the confidence he felt every time he had just fed.

"Where are you going?" Sasha asked as he walked off.

"I thought I saw something," Joey replied, his voice sounding almost playful. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

Sasha and Rayce again looked at each other as Joey walked off, and then glanced over to the needles and drugs lying by their victims. How much Rayce and Cash were alike, Sasha thought, continuing the comparisons of the two men that dominated her thoughts. Both were strong and independent, but Rayce had none of the responsibility that kept Cash busy and away from her. Had she still been mortal, she would have considered Rayce as being something more than simply a partner in crime. He stood about six feet, and was fairly well muscled, though not overly so. His long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and he seemed to have the same penchant for black leather jackets that Sasha herself enjoyed. Kindred spirits, perhaps. The days of needless infatuation were over now, though. Since her embrace, there were other desires in her mind, the most important and overwhelming being to feed. Sasha released herself from her mental digression and pointed at the heroin.

"So, what do you think we should do with all that?" she asked, already suspecting how Rayce would answer.

"Who cares?" Rayce responded. "If he wants to sell it, let him. He still has to find someone stupid enough to buy it."

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by a gunshot, then two more quickly followed. As Sasha and Rayce stood up, they heard a scream coming from the alley, a scream that was full of the knowledge that certain death had found someone. It was Joey's death scream, they knew, even before they started running down the alley to their friend.

As they turned the corner and viewed the scene, Sasha was forced to cover her eyes. At no time in her life, either before or after her embrace, had she set her eyes upon such brutality. She instinctively grasped Rayce, and buried her head against his shoulder. He stroked her hair to calm her. "Wait here," he said as he broke from her demanding grip and advanced toward Joey's corpse.

He knelt down over the body. From what he could tell, there appeared to be two wounds. The major wound was a huge incision in the chest which appeared to have been made by a battle-ax or similar large, razor sharp weapon. The cut went from the sternum down to the lower

abdomen, almost severing the right leg. Cut from nape to neck, Rayce thought, recalling Shakespeare's words from "MacBeth." The second wound was the severing of the left arm. This was a far less clean wound. It appeared as if the arm had been literally torn from its socket, with strands of flesh hanging from the shoulder. Joey's Glock was still gripped in the dead fingers, now attached to an arm with no body. Only once before had Rayce seen anything like this, and the memories that were conjured within his mind were not pleasant.

Rayce heard a muffled snuffle from behind him and suddenly remembered Sasha. He stood up from his examination, and returned to his newest friend. "Let's get out of here, ok?" He knew he would get no complaints from the prince's niece.

"Yeah, sure," Sasha replied, her word mumbled.

Rayce hurried them both to their motorcycles, purposely walking along the middle of the street. Joey's attacker could still be around, and if his suspicions were correct, the closer they stayed to public view, the safer they would be. They reached the bikes, and took off at breakneck speed across the city, never looking behind. There was no longer a feeling of freedom, Sasha thought. This was more like the feeling of flight from certain death, a fast ride taken in the interest of self-preservation rather than to free the spirit. The feeling was not welcome within her, and she tried to concentrate on the mansion, where her uncle could protect her—where Cash could protect her.

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IV

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Golden Gate Park was no more or less than he had expected. There were scattered trees, and the grass that was present was clipped neatly. Too neatly, he thought. The park represented no more than an attempt by humans to remind themselves of the wonderful natural world that was around them without having to expose themselves to the wilderness. Obviously, it did not remind them of nature's beauty enough to prevent them from destroying the world that had given them life. As he approached the designated meeting place, he smiled. All but one of his pack were already here. Two humans and two wolves, with one more human on her way.

When the pack had formed, it had been out of necessity. Their enemies had been many, and there were few garou who did not already run with a pack. His pack comprised changers from different tribes. He, of course, felt himself to be of the greatest — the Get of Fenris. A huge percentage of the greatest garou heroes had been of the Get, and this was a tradition he was sure would continue until the arrival of the Apocalypse. He then began to look over his pack, his friends.

James was the most imposing of those before him. He stood a tad above six feet and weighed a little over 200 lb. His red hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and even now he was taking a sip from his trademark flask. Like many of the Fianna, he seemed to have a predilection toward drink, a trait that was as commonly ascribed to the tribe as it was toward the people from which they sprang — the

Irish. Still, James was a formidable warrior, and a fabulous storyteller. It would be nice having him along on this quest for vengeance. He would be able to fight, and then later sing an epic song of their exploits, for all their people to hear.

Andrew Thelopolis was the next one he considered. Why had Andrew been so willing to launch this assault? No one trusted those of Andrew's tribe, the Shadow Lords. Even their name held a connotation of deceit and political maneuvering. However, he had never shown himself to be very much like the stereotypical Shadow Lord. He had instead been forthright and trustworthy in all things, much as a judge of the garou should be.

Asleep on the grass about ten feet from the two humans was Looks Within, a shaman who sprang from the Native Americans that Europeans had displaced so many years ago. Rarely would he let his packmates forget this crime of their forefathers. All in all, however, he was a valuable ally. Not only were his claws as sharp as any other's, and his spirit as ferocious as any garou born a wolf, but he was able to summon spirits to come to their aid. It was said that Looks Within had actually been born within the spirit world, and that totems often offered outrageous boons as a sign of their favor.

Lastly, there was Forgotten Teeth, or Natasha as she was known when she desired to shift into her human form. She sprang from the once great and now rapidly declining Silver Fang tribe. It was whispered among the garou that many of this clan suffered some form of derangement, and from what she had shown, Forgotten Teeth was no exception. In her attempt to restore the forgotten glory of her tribe, she had given in to a homicidal madness. This made her a somewhat unpredictable, if still ruthlessly efficient, warrior.

Even as he completed his appraisal of his comrades, they were joined by their last member. Strutting across the grass was Kristen Genetti, a native of San Francisco and a relative of the Gambioni family, which had suffered so greatly at the hands of the leeches. The moon goddess Luna had decreed for Kristen a fate as a trickster, one who would bring wisdom to her people through deceit and guile. Kristen had had other plans, however. She used her gifts for trickery to become more secretive and stealthy than any garou had a right to be. She had become a living weapon, an assassin more deadly than most of the greatest garou warriors had ever been. To her credit, she had been able to accomplish this goal without being a true warrior, but it was only a matter of time before her fate caught up with her.

"Greetings, Kristen," he offered cordially as she approached.

"Hello Mark," Kristen replied cordially. She nodded to the others, grateful that they had arrived to help her in seeking to avenge the deaths of the Gambioni twins.

"We have come here on a mission of vengeance," Mark began, addressing all of his pack. "The leeches have been conducting a war, and this can be tolerated no longer. Not only does this risk exposure of their true nature to the populace, and by extension our nature as well, but their actions have led to the deaths of two of our youngest."

"They will pay for their crimes!" Kristen screamed. Mark was taken aback by her uncharacteristic display of passion. He was not,

however, surprised at the howl that rang up in approval from Natasha. He let the moment pass, and waited until they were ready for him to continue.

"Yes, they will pay for their crimes," Mark agreed, a savage smile spreading his lips, exposing razor sharp canines. "We will make them pay. We will hunt every night, and sleep during the day as they do. The streets will flow with the blood of vampires, the minions of the Wyrms."

The reference to the Wyrms, the equivalent of Satan in the garou spirituality, aroused all present into a greater state of excitement. "Let us go!!" Mark shouted, inciting his pack into action. The two wolves sprang to their paws, and within moments the humans present had transformed into wolves themselves. Together they raced off across the grass, headed toward the city proper. Battles would be fought this night, and many kindred would die. Of that, Mark Larsson was sure.

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V

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Caitlin sat back in the booth that was forever reserved for Julian Luna and his guests. She had come to identify the club with going out, for it seemed as if whenever she went anywhere but work, she ended up there. However, her familiarity with the surroundings had never completely eased her mind when she entered. She had never been able to explain it, but something instinctual within her shied away from this place. It was almost like the cat that found discomfort with there being a large dog in the vicinity. The analogy made little sense, she knew, but it was the best she could do.

As her mind continued to wander, she saw Julian come in, accompanied as always by his bodyguard, Cash. The two of them were a strange pair, Caitlin thought for the umpteenth time. Julian seemed worldly, a man of great sophistication, while Cash appeared to be little more than a street punk. Julian smiled as he saw her, and strode over, never diverting his eyes from hers. Cash broke away from Julian at the bar, and within moments was nursing a beer.

"Hello," Julian said with a hint of a smile. "It's been awhile."

"The paper keeps me busy," Caitlin replied, surprised that she was making excuses. It had been Julian, not her, that had seemed to be the one that had been too busy lately to get together. "After all," Caitlin added, "I'm not just an editor. I refuse to give up reporting just because I have other responsibilities." Caitlin knew the excuse was valid, but she hoped that Julian would at least accept some of the blame for their recent lack of contact.

"You work too hard," Julian replied, declining the opportunity that Caitlin had presented to him. "Please allow me to make you forget all that for awhile." Julian slid across the semi-circular seat to come up next to her. Moments later a waitress came up with two glasses of red wine, and set one before each of them. "Thank you, Becca," Julian mumbled, without even looking up.

"So is this a business meeting in a very clever disguise?" Julian asked coyly. He could see the look in Caitlin's eyes, and knew that although she said she was done for the day, there was still something attached to work that she was still pondering.

"Isn't it always about work?" Caitlin responded, laughing inwardly at herself. Julian always seemed to know whether their meetings were meant for business or pleasure. "What's your niece been getting into lately?"

"What?" Julian asked, obviously taken aback. Caitlin's question had been blunt. He had expected her to dance around the issue for awhile, enjoying his company before getting down to business. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I didn't think you would," Caitlin responded with the air of someone reluctantly bearing bad tidings. "Look, Julian, one of my photographers has a picture of her taking place in a liquor store holdup."

"Are you sure?" Julian asked. He was already sure that Caitlin knew what she was talking about, or she would not have otherwise been there. Still, he needed to hear her incriminating words to send home the fact that she had indeed gotten hold of proof of Sasha's illicit activities, games she desired to play as a result of her Brujah blood.

"Yes, I'm sure," Caitlin replied. "She's wearing a mask, but I know her. There's no mistaking her." Caitlin produced the picture from a folder and showed it to Julian. "I'm not running the picture, it would do no good. There's no way to identify Sasha unless you already knew it was her. I just thought you should know."

"Thank you, I'll talk with her," Julian responded, hiding the anger that was building up within him. Even as he spoke, he knew speaking with Sasha would do no good. Asking a Brujah to refrain from performing chaotic, anti-social acts was like asking an eagle to catch its prey without flying. Again Julian found himself thinking of Rayce. The prince was certain that Sasha's new acquaintance had been behind Sasha's latest criminal exploits.

At that moment he saw Cameron enter, flanked by two of his bodyguards. This was definitely not the best time for the Brujah primogen to start acting up, Julian thought. Cameron stopped three steps from the floor, and scanned the room, settling his gaze on the bar. He practically lunged off of the steps in the direction of Cash, coming up to him almost before the young Gangrel was able to put his beer down.

Cameron grasped Cash's jacket and put his face right in the Gangrel's. "If you think your clan is going to get away with this, you're out of your mind," Cameron said, obviously on the border of frenzy. "I'll bury your clan, and stake you out in the sun." Cash rejected the option of responding, and instead went for his Glock, intending to put a bullet in Cameron's skull in order to shut him up.

Before Cash could finish drawing his gun, however, Julian was upon them both, his eyes seething with anger. "This place is elysium, no

violence will be permitted here." He looked both kindred over, making sure they both understood how serious he was. Any violence in an area considered elysium would be grounds for a death sentence.

Cash replaced his gun, and Cameron released him. "What is it you want here, Cameron?" Julian asked. Even speaking the Brujah's name caused the prince's anger to rise, made even worse by the recent news about Sasha.

"This bastard's clan has killed one of my own childer," Cameron accused. "I will not tolerate such an insult." Cameron's anger seemed to flow off of him in waves. "This is cause for a war, whelp. If you wanted one, now you've got it." Cash simply glared back at Cameron, unimpressed with the threats being leveled at him. The Gangrel primogen was as willing as Cameron was to get involved in a war.

"Cameron, settle down," Julian ordered. He had had quite enough of the Brujah primogen's tirade. "We will discuss this upstairs." As Julian crossed the room, he stopped at Caitlin's table. "I'm sorry to cut our meeting short, but urgent business has been brought to my attention. I can have someone drive you home."

"No, that's fine," Caitlin said. "I can take a cab." Caitlin stood up, straightened her new dress, and walked toward the exit. Lillie, emerging from a room behind the bar, watched her go, a small smile crossing her lips. It was time, she decided, to go upstairs. This could be very interesting.

On the second floor the argument began anew as soon as the three kindred were off the staircase.

"Julian, I demand this Gangrel's head," Cameron shouted, poorly attempting to make his rage sound righteous. "He has violated the Traditions by killing another of our kind. This is a crime punishable by death, and you know it. I demand justice."

Cash responded instantly. "Julian, you know neither I nor any member of my clan had anything to do with this. If we going to kill a Brujah, it would be him." He raised his finger at Cameron, who in his turn seemed rather unimpressed.

"Enough!" Julian shouted. "Who is it that has been killed, Cameron?"

"My latest childer, Joey," Cameron replied. Julian noted that Cameron seemed more intent on getting vengeance than he was in grieving for his latest addition to the clan. Julian felt a slight feeling of satisfaction, however. It was Joey that had been in the picture with Sasha, running from the liquor store. "Do you have the body?" Julian asked, knowing that the first responsibility of all was to protect the Masquerade. All other considerations were secondary.

"Of course," Cameron answered, seeming offended that Julian would think he could overlook such a detail. "It has been disposed of, at least what was left of it."

"What do you mean what was left of it?" Julian asked, his curiosity piqued.

"He was butchered, Julian," Cameron answered, his anger suddenly returning. "He was almost cut in half," Cameron added, his glare at Cash again making him seem more interested in having an opportunity to kill some Gangrel than in grieving for his dead childe. "I would think you'd be more concerned, Julian. Your precious Sasha was with him when he was attacked."

"And she saw the Gangrel do it?" Julian asked.

"No, he was around the corner," Cameron answered coolly. "Rayce and Sasha were sitting down having a heart to heart at the time." Cameron stressed the last part, knowing it would help to unhinge Cash even more. He had suddenly taken a perverse joy in reminding Cash that his lover was spending most of her time running around the Bay Area with Rayce.

"Is she ok?" Cash asked, showing his concern despite the fact that it was precisely what Cameron had been shooting for.

"Yes, they're both fine Cash, thank you for your false concern," Cameron replied. Had he not have just lost his newest childer, Cameron would have truly started to enjoy this torture of Cash.

"Where is she?" Julian asked, wanting to speak with his niece to find out if she had seen anything.

"She's at your mansion, with Rayce," Cameron said, again pointing out the relationship between the two. For the first time he noticed something new. He saw that Julian seemed as displeased as Cash that Sasha had been spending time with Rayce. Cameron made a mental note of the fact, planning to mention the friendship at every opportunity. "Some of my Brujah are hanging around outside the compound, just in case these crazy Gangrel try to attack my only witnesses, even on your ground," Cameron added.

"Enough accusations, Cameron," Julian stated flatly. "I will look into the matter, and you will receive justice. Do not worry yourself over it." The prince started for the door, motioning for Cash to join him.

"I demand justice now, Julian," Cameron said angrily. "My childe was just killed." Cameron was seething behind them in the room.

"You have my decision, Cameron," Julian said. "Now don't push it." Julian then left.

Not a second later, Lillie emerged from the back room, looking to see what pleasure she could derive from the situation as she searched for information. "What is it, Cameron?" she asked coyly. "Did Julian arrange for the hiring of more police in the city?" The Toreador primogen delighted in constantly reminding Cameron that he had thus far been unable to succeed in any legitimate business venture, and instead got all of his revenue through criminal activities.

"Nothing so trite," Cameron replied ruefully. "My childe was killed, and Julian has no interest in finding out who did it. He just wants to get home and make sure that bitch Sasha is still ok."

"Was she attacked too?" Lillie asked, apparently concerned. Even as

the words left her mouth, she was applauding herself inwardly, so convincing was the tone of her voice.

"No, that would have been too simple. It would have solved all kinds of problems," Cameron answered, seeming to be truly frustrated that Sasha had not been the victim. "Once again, she survived." Cameron started pacing the room, and Lillie just watched for a few moments.

"Any idea who killed the childe?" Lillie asked, doubting that the Gangrel had actually been behind the attack.

"Obviously, it was Gangrel avenging some imagined insult," Cameron answered, still intent on blaming the clan he hated for all bad events in the city.

"Rarely do the Gangrel imagine insults," Lillie replied, deciding to play Devil's Advocate. "If it was the Gangrel, Joey probably did something to deserve it. Any idea what that might have been?"

"The Gangrel are obviously imagining things," Cameron reiterated. "I haven't had my men kill a single one of those savages since I came into control of my clan." Cameron smiled when he made the claim, as if he should be awarded a medal for following the edicts of the prince, simply because he did not agree with them.

"How gracious of you." Lillie's tone was somewhat condescending, but not enough to truly offend. She was getting better at playing the concerned Toreador, she thought.

"Not now, Lillie," Cameron said, not being in the mood for any of the Toreador's sarcasm. With that, Cameron stormed out.

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VI

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Cash sped up the road approaching Julian's mansion, every passing moment bringing new thoughts into his head. He could see Sasha in mortal danger, and could only guess at her reaction when Joey had been killed, apparently not far from where she and Rayce had been having their "heart to heart," as Cameron had so glibly put it. It wasn't the concern over Sasha's well being that caused most of the confusion in Cash's head, however. It was the thought of his lover sitting next to Rayce, enjoying his company while she still swore to love the Gangrel primogen. Cash couldn't understand why Sasha behaved the way she did. If she truly loved him, as she said she did, then she should not have been spending so much quality time with Rayce. Cash knew how things happened. Over time, Rayce would slowly take up the space in Sasha's heart that Cash presently occupied. Sasha should know better, Cash thought. She should realize the possibilities. If she valued her relationship with Cash as much as she said, she should refrain from placing herself in situations that could tempt her. After all, Cash thought, he was willing to do no less himself. The Gangrel was so wrapped up in his thoughts that at first he did not see the dancing lights from the top of the hill as he approached Julian's mansion. When he finally realized something was wrong, he was dumbstruck. His concern for Sasha's welfare suddenly returned,

for the moment pushing the jealousy and confusion from his mind. "What the hell is that?" Cash asked, hoping Julian would have a better idea than he himself did.

"What?" Julian asked from the back seat, not yet seeing what Cash did. Then his eyes, not as sensitive as Cash's, began to make out the reflecting red lights from the hill. "Cash, go faster," Julian instructed, a sense of panic starting to rise in Julian just as it had in Cash.

The Gangrel needed little prompting to drive faster, having already increased speed before Julian's instructions. As they approached the mansion, they could both see one corner of the building ablaze, several fire engines pulled up in front of the building, firemen fighting the flames. As Cash pulled into the drive, he was stopped by one of the firefighters. "Sorry, pal, can't let you get any closer."

The back window slowly rolled down, and Julian stuck his head out. "This is my property, I demand to be let in."

"Your place? Well, I have good news for you, only a couple of rooms on the second floor will be burned out," the man replied. "The rest of the building should be ok. We'll let you in as soon as sure it's all safe."

"It's ok, Fred, let them in," a familiar voice called out from behind the fireman. Julian saw Frank Kohaneck approaching the Mercedes, an indifferent look on his face. Cash opened Julian's door, and the prince got out, immediately turning to Kohaneck.

"What happened here, Frank?" Julian's agitation was obvious, even to Frank's mortal eyes.

"Looks like somebody you're competing with decided to remove you from the game," Frank replied with a shrug. "Can't say I'm all too happy to see they didn't succeed."

"Your concern is noted," Julian responded, not being in the mood for one of the exchanges that characterized his strange relationship with the San Francisco inspector. "My niece was inside, is she ok?"

"I don't know, Julian," Frank replied, feeling struck by Julian's concern despite himself. "There are a lot of bodies, both inside the building and outside the perimeter. Someone went to a lot of trouble to be thorough, that's for sure. To tell you the truth, I'm surprised someone who would have planned and executed this so well would have made the mistake of hitting it when you weren't here."

Julian turned to Cash and gave him the command that he had been waiting for, "Cash, check the bodies."

"Yes, Julian." The Gangrel immediately raced off toward the line of bodies that had been assembled by the police, checking each one to see if it was Sasha. In the back of his mind, while he prayed he would not find Sasha's corpse, he hoped that he would find Rayce's. That would end his problem quickly.

Julian's head started spinning. His home had never been attacked. No one had ever dared. He couldn't believe anyone in the city would have

attempted the assault. It was possible, he thought, that the Brujah might have considered such an attack, especially during the days of Eddie, but half of the dead were Brujah, and not many of them seemed to be inside the compound. They seemed mostly to have been killed outside the walls. Perhaps Cyrus had been behind it, Julian pondered. He was, by all accounts, trying to consolidate all of California under his rule. Los Angeles would also have given him the soldiers he would have needed to pull off an attack like this. Julian thought about it more, and decided it was not very likely, but it should not be discarded as a theory.

"Julian!" Cash yelled from next to the bodies. The Gangrel's voice brought Julian out of his reverie. "Julian, she's not here."

Julian's fears eased. At least Sasha was probably alive, wherever she was. "Is Rayce around anywhere?"

"No." Cash's voice grated as he said the word, unable to hide his disappointment that Rayce had appeared to also escape the carnage.

"At least Jeffrey and Cassandra were also out tonight, so they should be ok," Julian said, once more looking around his grounds, so cluttered with emergency vehicles. "Get in the car, Cash. We're going to go tell Cameron he's lost more Brujah tonight."

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VII

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The motel room was cramped, especially as they all lay there in their wolf-man forms. While it was not good for space economy, the crinos form did allow for regeneration of injuries more quickly than any of the other forms the garou were capable of taking. By the looks of the injuries, Mark thought, it would be a couple of days before they would be able to attack again. They had dealt a terrible blow to the city's kindred that night, however. They had killed thirteen leeches at the mansion, plus the other one in the alley that Kristen had dispatched earlier in the evening. He had not lost a single garou, either. True, Mark acknowledged, Looks Within and James had taken serious injuries, but they had made it out to fight another day.

What's more, they had dispensed with claws in favor of their fangs and klaives, the knife of the garou. Kristen and Andrew even used guns they had taken from slaughtered vampires. It was unlikely, he thought, that the kindred would figure out who had hit them, unless they could not find the survivors before they spread the word. Likely, the scared vampires would go into hiding until this was all over, Mark thought. That was their way. They never risked themselves to help their society as a whole, which was why the kindred were weak..

"What are you thinking, Mark?" Kristen asked, obviously not yet ready to go to sleep.

"I was considering how great a victory we have won today." Mark's

pride was evident in his voice, and Kristen knew that Mark was thinking most of the glory that he would receive from the members of his tribe. The Get of Fenris valued combat ability above all other things. Mark had just done a great deal to increase his own prestige.

"Two of them got away, though, and I don't think the prince was home." Kristen said, pointing out the shortcomings of their strike. Her disappointment was evident in her voice.

"What was with those two?" Mark asked, referring to the two kindred that had escaped his pack's assault. He was obviously confounded by what they had faced. "Was that a mage?"

"No," Andrew answered from across the room, "he was a member of the undead. Mages lose magical ability when they are embraced."

"Then what was it?" Kristen asked, her voice now displaying as much confusion as Mark's had. "It caused the earth to attack us. I didn't know vampires could do that."

"It was a learning experience," Mark answered, pushing all doubt and confusion from his mind. "We will be better prepared next time."

"Definitely." Kristen answered. "Next time we'll finish the job."

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VIII

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Rayce opened the door to his apartment and carried Sasha in. Her body was limp, but she was still conscious, moaning lightly.

"You live here?" she asked, surveying the room. Its bare white walls were cracking, and the only pieces of furniture were a beaten up armchair, a rusty metal traystand, and a TV.

"Yes," he answered. "But appropriately, my house is not what it appears to be at first." He continued through the room, and opened the door on the far side. On the other side of the door lay a plush carpet, and a dark blue wall holding richly decorated tapestries.

"Whoa," Sasha commented, now duly impressed, "nice digs."

"It is simply enough to help me get by," Rayce said, smiling as he lay Sasha down on the couch. He had never let anyone in this sanctuary. He considered the apartment his last refuge, the one place he could escape from the insanity of the world around him. The jihad and all of its political maneuvering and wars could be forgotten here, if only for a short time. I will have to erase her memory of this place, he thought. Even with Sasha, a Brujah that seemed to share his spirit, he was unwilling to expose his innermost secrets. Of course, those secrets only began with the apartment, and became even more concealed from there. For one of his ancestry, however, secrecy had become essential.

Sasha opened her eyes and looked at up at him. "What were those things?" she asked, referring to the werewolves that had attacked her uncle's mansion. The question brought Rayce back to the present problem.

"Lupines, the shapeshifters of the supernatural world," Rayce replied, himself just starting to calm down from the battle. Rayce walked over toward a cabinet at the far side of the room, and pulled out two 10mm Glocks. He then dug past bullets and clips and opened a secret compartment at the back of the cabinet, pulling out four different clips of ammunition. "They don't care much for kindred," he added as he loaded the two pistols.

"They killed everyone, didn't they?" Sasha asked, a bloody teardrop now forming in the corner of her eye.

"Everyone in the building, yes," Rayce replied evenly. The finality in his voice was stunning to Sasha, who could only stare at him. "They were all badly injured at the end of it, though, and were probably not able to go after anyone else tonight. Your uncle should be safe."

It seemed to Sasha as if Rayce's voice actually carried a slight sense of concern for the prince's welfare. Not many Brujah go that route, she thought. It seemed to her that Rayce was even more different than she had thought.

"Are you ok to go hunting?" Rayce asked, knowing that Sasha really had no choice in the matter. They would both need to feed. "You burned a lot of blood getting yourself out of there." Rayce was already getting a trenchcoat from the closet, knowing he would accept nothing but a positive response from her.

"Yeah, I can go. I think I have to goâ€¦ I'm really thirsty." Rayce looked back to her and smiled as he grabbed a katana from another secret compartment, this one in the back of the closet. Its scabbard seemed intricately decorated in gold, and its hilt decorated with silver.

"Then come here, there's one thing more that we need to do" Rayce said. He stood waiting for Sasha by the door, his hands at his sides. Despite his unthreatening stance, Sasha found his appearance to be rather intimidating, and only got off the couch with great effort.

"Sure," Sasha said, managing a smile. She swayed across the room to Rayce slowly. He immediately waved a hand in front of her, and she collapsed.

Rayce stood above her for a few moments, and then knelt down beside her, whispering in her ear. "Sasha, there was an attack at the mansion. You did not see who it was, as we were both able to escape out the back before we were discovered. We went from the mansion to my apartment downtown, where we thought we'd be safe until the morning. We got hungry, and decided to feed. While we were hunting, you became lightheaded and pulled over in front of this brownstone."

Rayce picked Sasha up and carried her to the bottom of the stairs and

then onto the street, and placed her on the back of her motorcycle just as she started to wake up.

"You ok?" Rayce asked her, false concern in his voice sounding truly genuine.

"What happened?" Sasha asked, looking around in confusion.

"I don't know, you tell me," Rayce responded. "One minute we're flying down the road at breakneck speed, and the next minute you're pulling over to the side looking all woozy." Rayce gazed at her intently, looking for any sign that his alteration of her memory had not taken effect.

"Oh yeah. I must have gotten light-headed or something," Sasha replied with an embarrassed smile. "That felt really weird." Sasha looked at Rayce, seeing the look of concern on his face as he gazed at her. He seemed to be analyzing her extremely closely. He's probably trying to figure out whether or not I'm still ok to ride, Sasha thought to herself. I'll show him. "Come on Rayce, I'm hungry. Keep up if you can."

Sasha started up her bike with a violent kick, and took off down the street. Behind her, Rayce waited for a few moments, and finally formed a smile. Yes, his alterations had taken completely. Now he needed something to distract the city's elders even more than the lupines could. With all luck, Cameron could be killed years ahead of schedule, and he knew just the man to call for help. He started up his bike and took off after Sasha, still basking in the success he had achieved thus far— with a little unexpected help from a pack of garou.

CHAPTER 2

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I

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Julian looked around the table at his gathered primogen. The concern and fear was etched on the faces of all of them. Never before had an attack like this occurred in San Francisco, and they were now dumbstruck as to how to respond. How could they respond? They did not even know who it was that had attacked them. The only things they knew for sure were that the attackers were skilled in combat, and either did not lose a single one of their number during the attack, or took the trouble to conceal their identities by carrying off their casualties.

"Are we just going to sit here all night, Julian, or is there something more constructive we could be doing?" Cameron asked, his agitation coming through as irritation.

"What is there we can do?" Lillie questioned. "We don't even know who hit us."

Julian surveyed the table during the moment of silence that followed. "That's right, and that's probably where we should start. Does anyone have any ideas?"

"Well, I'm ready to rule out the possibility that last night's events were the doing of the Gangrel," Cameron began, not even looking at the Gangrel primogen as he spoke. "They don't have the brains or the initiative to carry out an attack on your mansion that is effective as that was." Julian had initially hoped that Cameron might actually apologize for immediately accusing the Gangrel of being responsible for Joey's death, but he chided himself for not knowing better. Even when he had been wrong, Cameron would find a way to insult the Gangrel.

"I'll show you initiative, Brujah," Cash returned, glaring at Cameron as he spoke.

"Julian, could you please restrain your bodyguard?" Cameron began, his voice heavy with false innocence. "This isn't the time to fight amongst ourselves."

"Cash, please. Cameron is correct," Julian said softly, irritated that reason demanded he actually side with Cameron. "Be sure keep your tongue in check, though, Brujah," Julian said as he turned to Cameron. He looked from one to the other, making sure that they had both understood the intent he held behind his words. Even now, he thought, they're at each other's throats. No doubt everyone here is planning just who, or what, they would be willing to sacrifice if the situation becomes worse. There was no doubt in Julian's mind that Cameron would be working behind the scenes to move himself up in the city's hierarchy. The prince decided that Cameron would have to be watched even more than usual if he were to be trusted. How could they effectively field a resistance to this threat under these circumstances, Julian wondered. He could not begin to guess.

"Now that we have decided who is not at fault, I think we should figure out who is," Julian stated, hoping the primogen could get something constructive done at the meeting. He looked around the table at each person, waiting for suggestions.

Lillie finally started them off. "An attack of that violence and magnitude could only be the work of the Sabbat," she said. "Many of our dead were riddled with bullets, and the rest seemed to have been cut apart by fangs or swords. It's what I would expect of them." She looked to the others, expecting confirmation of her hypothesis. The first reaction she received from Julian, however, was surprise. Although he did not say anything, he was startled by the unreasoning hatred that Lillie seemed to possess toward the Sabbat. Julian decided he would have to ask Lillie what the Sabbat had ever done to her to evoke such a reaction. That was a question that could wait, however. The prince looked around to the other primogen, wondering what they were thinking.

"I agree with Lillie," Cameron began. "The Sabbat have been found occasionally in the city, no doubt doing some reconnaissance. I guess they decided the time was right for an all-out attack."

"Where did they all come from?" Daedalus questioned, knowing from his sources that no large group of Sabbat vampires had been found in the city at any recent point in time. "There would have to be many of them to have launched that assault, at least a dozen. Someone would have seen something if that many kindred were to have entered the city."

"What did Sasha say about it?" Cash questioned.

"Not much," Julian answered, disappointed that Sasha had not been of more use in answering some of his questions. "She apparently was able to slip out a back window with Rayce without being seen."

"There were dead found in the back," Cash stated. "How is it they were able to slip through?" The idea of Rayce and Sasha being able to simply escape when so many skilled Gangrel guards had been extinguished struck Cash as dubious. "How much do you know about your Brujah friend, Cameron?" Cash asked, looking to once again put the Brujah primogen on the defensive.

"Enough," Cameron replied, dismissing the question with a wave of his hand. "Don't worry about Rayce, he's loyal."

"To who," Cash continued, still hoping to put Cameron on the spot. "Remember Cameron, many of your clan are members of the Sabbat."

"Just what are you implying, boy?" Cameron asked threateningly. He lowered his eyes at Cash, hurling mental daggers at the Gangrel's skull.

"No more than the obvious, cretin," Cash replied. "I wouldn't expect you to understand any more than that."

"Enough, you two," Julian ordered, interjecting in their exchange once again. "While there may be suspicion surrounding Rayce, he has not been found guilty of doing anything. For now, he is considered innocent, though suspect. Is that clear?" Both primogen nodded their grudging approval, and Julian continued. "I think Lillie's hypothesis has merit, and we'll proceed as if we are being invaded by the Sabbat. You may all go and discuss matters with your clans." Though Julian knew that there was no evidence of the Sabbat being present in the city, he also knew that the Sabbat posed perhaps the largest threat to the interests of each of the primogen. By acting as if there was a Sabbat siege of the city, Julian could expect the highest level of preparedness from San Francisco's kindred. He had a feeling that he might need it.

As they all rose and began to make their way out, Julian stopped Cash. "I'll be going to the Haven at midnight," he said. "Make any arrangements you feel are necessary."

"That's completely out of the question," Cash replied. "I can't guarantee your safety out there. You've got to stay where you can be protected."

"After last night, I don't think we'd be able to find a completely safe place," Julian responded. "Besides, I have to speak to Frank and Sonny about anything the police may have found during the day." Julian tried to stress the last part. He wanted everyone in the room to remember that he had several mortal contacts that could work on the problem while the kindred all slept. Julian's contacts were one of the main advantages he held over the other primogen.

"OK, Julian," Cash said, relenting. "I'll come back to get you at 11:45."

Cash walked out, leaving Julian alone with his thoughts. The Sabbath? It was possible, he figured. Still, there were nagging doubts about Cyrus in Los Angeles. The idea of Cyrus did not make total sense, however. Despite the fact that everyone knew of Cyrus' ambition, even Julian doubted that Los Angeles' prince, himself a Brujah, would have engaged in the slaughter of members of his own clan.

Of course, there was also the possibility that there were anarchs that had arrived in the city, looking to overthrow San Francisco as they had virtually every other city in California. However, this would have had the same effect as raising the suspicions of Cyrus. Everyone in the state knew that the anarchs that had overthrown the princes of the cities had been Brujah. Julian was certain that Cameron had not orchestrated the attack on the mansion. As he had with Cyrus, Julian reached the immediate conclusion that Brujah would never have taken part in the mass slaughter of other Brujah. Still the question nagged at Julian as to who could have been behind the attack. He decided to settle on the same explanation that the other primogen had â€” the Sabbath. Preparing for the Sabbath seemed the most prudent course of action, for if the Sabbath had laid siege to his city, he would indeed be in for the fight of his life.

Julian retired to his study to wait for Cash, sitting in front of the fire. The flames were fascinating to him, warming and soothing with their random dance of light. At the same time, however, the fire was terrifying on an instinctual level. It had taken years for him to get used to once again sitting in front of the fire, a perfectly normal habit during his mortal life. Now, though, the flames reminded him of the sun that could destroy him. What a great price immortality charged him â€” the inability to ever again be comfortable in daylight, along with the constant threat that someone would come along and take immortality from him with a swipe of a sword.

Finally, Cash entered. "It's time, Julian."

"Yes, I guess it is," Julian agreed. He just hoped that he would be able to deal with whatever fate had decided to send at him.

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II

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Cash had done his job, Julian thought approvingly. Two cars, each with four armed Ventrue, had accompanied Julian's vehicle to the Haven, along with six Gangrel on motorcycles. Now inside the bar, he found himself virtually surrounded by bodyguards. At his usual booth he sipped from a glass of red wine. It had taken him nearly a century to be able to imbibe any mortal food without regurgitating it up almost instantly. Even now, however, he could only stomach a few sips of the red wine that he once loved. He began to wonder whether or not his kindred body was relating to him the subtleties of flavor that he had known as a mortal, but his question was interrupted by Lillie as she slid into the booth next to him.

"I'm surprised to see you out in the open tonight," he commented to

her, remembering her outburst at the Conclave meeting.

"Well, I heard you and your guards were here, so I figured this would be the safest place in the city," Lillie replied, locking her alluring gaze on Julian's eyes. Smiling as she talked, Lillie seemed to view the situation as nothing more than a minor inconvenience. However, Julian could detect the tinges of fear and discomfort in her voice. She is getting better at hiding it, though, he thought. Someday she'll be able to tell me that night is as dark as day without me being able to detect any deception.

At that moment, Julian noticed a slight commotion by the entrance. Some of his guards were surrounding another individual, who for his part seemed unimpressed by their unsolicited attention. Cash broke off from the group at the door and approached Julian. "What is it, Cash?" Julian asked, curious about what was going on.

"New kindred in town," Cash replied. He says he's come to present himself to the prince."

"Let him come over, Cash," Julian said, wondering whether the newcomer would provide any insight into recent events within his domain.

"Sure," Cash answered as he readjusted the gun at his waist. He waved the stranger over, and the man approached.

The newcomer was only a little over five and a half feet tall, and of moderate build. His features showed Japanese and Caucasian descent. His hair was neatly cut, and he was wearing black jeans with a black button down shirt. All in all, he appeared respectful and harmless. "You ask entrance into my city?" Julian asked him.

"As the Traditions demand," the newcomer replied smoothly. He stood with his hands behind his back, very formal in his response. He's confident, thought Julian, although he was unable to decide if that were good or bad.

"What is your name, visitor?" Julian asked, interested in probing the man before him for every bit of information that he could get.

"Jonathan Yashida," the man answered evenly, looking directly into the prince's eyes. "But you may call me Johnny."

"May I?" Julian asked, almost incredulous at the way Johnny had intoned his response.

"What I meant was, that is what people usually call me," Johnny said, clarifying his response to make sure that he had not offended his host. He was still unflappable, even after Julian had acted as if he had been offended.

"Where are you from?" Julian asked, once again returning to his interrogation.

"All over," Johnny responded enigmatically, a thin smile appearing on his lips. He seemed as though he were enjoying leaving the prince in the dark as much as possible. "I move around quite a bit," Johnny added. "I should not be in your city for overly long, if that is what

you are worried about."

"That's not my concern," Julian replied. "I just wish to know your lineage and motives in my city â€" no more or less than most princes would ask."

"Surely," Yashida responded, maintaining the thin smile. "I am of Clan Telemon. I come to you from New Orleans, originally from Los Angeles, and I simply wish to sit back and watch the fireworks in your city."

"What?" Julian asked. Yashida's answer had produced more questions than Julian had expected. "What clan did you say you were a part of?" Julian asked, deciding what question he would start with.

"Telemon, a new bloodline from back east," Johnny replied, portraying the slightest hint of irritation. Julian assumed that this kindred had been asked that particular question before. "We are accepted by the Camarilla, and my sire is prince of his own city," Johnny continued, his voice betraying a slight sense of irritation.

His sire is a prince, Julian thought, realizing the newcomer must have influence somewhere, and would likely be of somewhat potent blood. "Do you know the original clan you come from?" Julian asked, probing more into Johnny's lineage.

"It is not something I wish to discuss," Johnny replied, his tone betraying his belief that he expected the question to be forgotten. While Julian was not willing to forget his question immediately, he noted that Yashida did not seem uncomfortable with the question, simply annoyed. Johnny had simply portrayed the opinion that the answer to the question was none of the prince's business.

"I am forcing you to answer, if you wish entrance," Julian said, making it clear that he, not Johnny, was in control of the conversation. The prince did not care for a visitor refusing a request in their first conversation, and his voice conveyed this to Yashida.

"I could stay in your city for quite awhile whether you permit it or not," Johnny replied, apparently unimpressed with Julian's position. "You seem to be a little busy lately." This was more than Julian was willing to take, and he lunged out of his seat and grabbed the small, impudent kindred, who didn't even bother to move, and likewise did not seem surprised by the action. In fact, Lillie noted, watching the scene, Johnny seemed to be trying to push Julian's buttons, seeing how long the prince would restrain himself.

"Situation or not, if you come into my city without my permission, I'll bury you, neonate," Julian growled, making it sure that he would not accept Johnny's flip demeanor in his presence.

"So be it, prince," Johnny replied evenly, his voice conveying the impression that he had decided to grant Julian an undeserved favor despite the prince's outburst. Yashida looked down at Julian's hands, which still clenched the front of his shirt. After a moment, Julian released his grip, and Johnny continued. "My bloodline was originally Brujah, but we have progressed beyond that. We are now capable of discipline and thought." Although he had given in to Julian's wishes, Yashida still seemed unimpressed with his situation, as if he were in

control of everything that occurred at the table.

Brujah, Julian thought and he's originally from Los Angeles. His guard went up as quickly as his suspicions. "Do you know Cyrus?" Julian saw a momentary look of surprise in Johnny's face, and suddenly felt as if he once again held a definite advantage in the conversation. The newcomer had not expected Julian to already know a bit about him.

"Yes, he's my sire," Yashida replied, quickly regaining his composure. Although he had not expected Julian to know of his lineage, Johnny saw no reason to hide anything.

"What are you doing here, then? You should be back in Los Angeles with him," Julian replied. The prince felt as if his heart was racing in his chest with excitement. It was becoming more and more obvious that Cyrus had indeed had a hand in the events of the past few days.

"What are talking about?" Johnny asked. "My sire is in Pennsylvania." Both men stood in silence for a few moments, and then Yashida got a look of enlightenment on his face. "Oh, I see the mistake. My sire is Siras, S-I-R-A-S. It's a completely different man. I am only distantly related to the prince of LA."

"Oh," Julian responded, sitting back in his seat again. As quickly as Julian's hopes had risen, they had come crashing back down. The questions once again had no answers. "You know of our war?" Julian asked, remembering that Johnny had mentioned coming to the city to watch the fireworks.

"Yes, but I will take no part," Yashida replied, his manner seeming to indicate that this was not even a subject open to debate.

"Why not?" Julian asked. "I am the prince. If I command you to fight, then you must obey."

"Word has it you're fighting the Sabbat," Johnny answered immediately. "I've already fought my war against them this decade, and I refuse to be the throwaway soldier of the elders for at least a few more years." The Telemon seemed to lose interest in his conversation with the prince, and began to look around the club, wondering what kind of interesting people he would meet in San Francisco.

"You have fought the Sabbat?" Julian asked, forcing Yashida to pay attention once again to talk of the city's war. Perhaps this man could yet be of some use, Julian thought.

"It is how my clan captured its city," Johnny replied. "If you wish advice, call me," Yashida suggested. He reached into his pocket, ignoring the fact that Cash immediately went to his pistol as Johnny moved to produce a concealed item. Johnny slowed his movements somewhat, so that the prince's bodyguard would not feel as if Julian was in danger, and he produced a small business card. "Here is my beeper number," Johnny said as he handed the card over to the prince. "Do not expect much else besides advice, though. I'd rather leave town than get caught up in another war." The Telemon then departed out through the watching bodyguards.

Once he had departed, Julian turned to Lillie. "What do you think?"

"He is a diabolist," she replied, as though no other words were necessary. In most respects, no other words were necessary, Julian thought. Johnny Yashida had fed upon other kindred, most likely his elders, gaining in power by doing so. He was not to be trusted. However, the question remained as to how much power he had gained. Although he could not be trusted, could he be challenged? Julian wondered. At that moment, though, Sonny and Frank came in and approached the table. At last, Julian thought, maybe now I will get some answers.

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III

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Rayce sat on his Harley, waiting for his friend to show up. He was already twenty minutes overdue, and the waiting was beginning to become unbearable, even for one who had spent so many years developing patience. So much had happened in Rayce's life, and he suddenly felt that it had all simply been preamble to the situation he found himself in. He could feel that his destiny had arrived, and he was getting restless having to wait the final hours to embrace his future. It was then that he heard the low hum of the Kawasaki motorcycle engine.

"Nice hog," Yashida commented, referring to Rayce's motorcycle as he pulled up and got off his own bike. Little about Johnny had changed since the last time Rayce had seen him. The ripped jeans, the leather jacket, the blue hair. He seemed the perfect image for a Brujah. Somewhere along the line, though, he had developed differently, and became part of a distinct bloodline apart from his anarchic ancestors. Not far below the rebellious surface, Rayce knew, was a disciplined kindred who was more than willing to play by the rules, be they the rules of the Camarilla or of someone else's as long as those rules were not the making of the Sabbat.

"Thanks," Rayce responded, taking a brief moment to also admire his own bike. "How did your meeting with Luna go?" Rayce had coached Johnny on preparing for his meeting with Luna, and though Yashida had performed perfectly in his rehearsals, Rayce seriously doubted that Johnny had managed to be as polite and respectful as Rayce had advised him to be. Rayce had simply wanted to make sure Julian Luna knew as little about Yashida as possible, his goal had not been to have Johnny earn the prince's enmity.

"It went very much the way you said it probably would," Johnny responded with a smile. "Luna seemed even more confused when I was done than he was before I started, and you should have seen him before I even got going. He was absolutely beside himself." Johnny laughed to himself as he reached a hand out. "What about my piece? I think I'll be allowed to have it now." Both kindred had known that Yashida would be searched before being allowed anywhere near Julian Luna, and so Johnny had left his weapons with Rayce before going to his meeting with San Francisco's prince.

In response to Johnny's question, Rayce tossed him a 9mm handgun.

"That's a nice piece of hardware," Rayce commented as Johnny caught the weapon and deftly twirled it on his index finger. "That military issue?"

"Yeah, built-in silencer," Johnny replied as he gazed at his weapon. "It pays to have a childe who's in Special Forces." Yashida rubbed the weapon on his jeans to remove a smudge of dirt, and concealed it by the small of his back. "What about the others?" Johnny asked, gesturing quickly to one of the saddlebags on Rayce's motorcycle.

"Hold your horses," Rayce said as he took one of the bags off his bike. "You think you have enough weapons here, Johnny?"

"One can only hope so," the Telemon answered with a grin. "Say what you will, but if I run out of weapons, I die. I'd really rather not let that happen." Though he generally disliked admitting it, Johnny was under no illusions about his lack of physical strength. He had come to rely upon weapons for defense, knowing that strength of arm would never be enough to keep him alive in a crunch.

Rayce was increasingly full of disbelief as he dug through the bag. "God damn. What do we have here?" the Brujah asked, glancing back at Johnny. "Butterfly knife, Glock 10mm, sawed off double barrel shotgun, tanto blade, switchblade, and a silver-coated ninja-to." Rather than bothering to hand the weapons to Yashida one at a time, Rayce simply handed the entire bag to the Telemon, allowing him to hide the weapons on his person as he saw fit. "What do you need three guns for?" Rayce asked sarcastically as Johnny put the shotgun in a small leather holster on his back.

Johnny looked at Rayce as though he thought explanation unnecessary, but gave one just the same. "The 9 has standard hollow tip bullets, the 10 has silver rounds, and the shotgun has phosphorous shells," Johnny replied, attempting a condescending tone. "Different guns have different uses, Rayce. Didn't they teach you that in Brujah School?"

"No, they taught us about the treachery of the Ventrue and Toreador," Rayce responded, suddenly becoming intense. "Don't mention that again."

"Sure," Johnny replied, trying to cover the awkward moment with a smile.

"So when do I get my payment?" Yashida asked, climbing onto his bike and attaching the ninja-to to the left side.

"If I help you steal the diamond tonight, do you promise to stay in town until this all done?" Rayce asked. He wanted Yashida's help in his latest venture, and knew that to get the Telemon into the city, he had needed to mention the presence of a rare diamond that was on display. From what Rayce had heard, Johnny's apprentice was not yet up to the task of helping with the heist, so he offered to exchange favors with Yashida.

"What the hell else am I gonna do?" Johnny asked in response to Rayce's question. "I sure don't want to leave San Francisco until the garou problem is resolved. They'll probably be waiting on the outskirts of the city for any of us to leave. I should have my head

examined for even agreeing to come here." Johnny got up on the bike and started it. "Well then, I guess it's off to the museum."

"You sure you can get past the security?" Rayce asked once again. The last time Rayce had seen Johnny, he had been impressed by the Telemon's skills. From what he had heard lately, Yashida's abilities were now legendary. However, he had not gotten as far as he had in life by taking unnecessary chances.

"Are bears bare, do bees be? Of course I can get past security," Johnny returned with a smile, impressed with his attempt at poetry. With that the two rode off into the night.

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IV

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In his mansion, Julian Luna waited for the sun to rise, hoping he'd make it through the day's sleep to see another night. He heard a knock at the door, but decided to let Lillie answer it. A couple of minutes later he saw Cameron enter with Rayce, while Lillie and Sonny followed closely behind.

"What is it Cameron?" Julian asked, unable to hide his irritation after his eventful evening. He had no desire to have to deal with another of the Brujah primogen's tirades.

"I hear you have let a new Brujah enter the city," Cameron said, attempting to sound as formal and informed as he could. "Why have you not informed me that there has been an addition to my clan?" Julian was surprised with Cameron's serious demeanor, noting how he seemed intent on getting his hands on the new kindred. Julian exerted a great deal of effort in hiding his glee at having done something that had irked Cameron. The prince then chose his words carefully, looking to make himself look as oblivious as possible to Cameron's irritation.

"He no longer claims to be Brujah," Julian stated matter-of-factly. "He now claims to be of Clan Telemon, and thus does not fall under your jurisdiction." Julian said the words with a large measure of pleasure, despite the fact that he needed to keep Cameron happy if the clans were to truly unite against their latest threat. Unable to hide his amusement any longer, Julian allowed a thin smile to cross his face. This only served to enrage Cameron all the more.

"If he was embraced by Brujah, then he is Brujah," Cameron replied angrily. "The matter is closed as far as I'm concerned. I expect you to send him to me."

"No," Julian replied smugly. "If you think he's still Brujah, then you find him and try explaining to him the theory behind your opinion." Julian then crossed his arms on his chest, more satisfied than he had been in a long while.

"Where is he?" Cameron demanded, seeming as if he was fighting as hard as he could to restrain himself from physically attacking the prince.

"Probably in the city," Julian responded, only seeming to grow happier with every passing moment of Cameron's rage. "Other than that, I don't know," Julian added. "It's not all that big a city, Cameron. How long could it possibly take you to find him? After all, you're always reminding me how large and efficient your clan is."

"What ****do**** you know, prince?" Cameron asked, having grown tired of Julian's evasiveness.

"Only that he has been in a war with the Sabbat, and has sat on a conclave himself as primogen of his clan," Julian answered, realizing that Cameron would be impressed by such credentials as much as Julian himself had been. Julian waited for Cameron to absorb what he had told him, and then continued. "He has had positive relations with several princes back east, including his own sire. He is, in effect, the ideal that the Camarilla could hope for out of a neonate. He is afforded ancilla status. Respect that Cameron." Julian did not bother to hold back any of the information he had been able to gather from some contacts back east. Indeed, he had been impressed by almost everything he had ever heard of Yashida. Of course, though, there was the fact of his diablerie, which would prevent him from ever setting up shop in San Francisco, at least as long as Julian was prince.

"Fine," Cameron replied, displeased with the situation but wise enough to realize that he could not change anything. The Brujah primogen had gone to the mansion to discuss far more crucial matters than another self-important anarch.

"Is there anything else?" Julian asked. Normally, Cameron would have stormed out of the mansion after having been treated with disrespect. However, he still stood in the middle of the room, and Julian could see Cameron shifting his feet slightly. The Brujah obviously wished to ask for a favor, and that fact made him uncomfortable. If nothing else, Cameron was proud. He hated to sound as if he needed anyone's help.

"Can I stay here today?" Cameron asked, not being able to even look at Julian as he made his request. The words took a tremendous effort to speak, but his survival could be at stake. It was not uncommon for the Sabbat to have ghouls, human thralls empowered and held in check by the drinking of kindred blood. Cameron knew that if anyone were to attack during the day, while he was at his most vulnerable, he would likely not awaken to see the following night.

Julian looked at Cameron for a few moments, appearing to consider the request. Underneath his cool facade, however, he was completely shocked that Cameron would come to him for protection. This man had, after all, killed his sire, a fact that Julian could not possibly be expected to have yet recovered from. The request had merit, though, Julian acknowledged. With Cameron would come the defenses the Brujah primogen was able to bring with him. More than that, however, was the fact that Cameron's presence in the mansion could help solidify the alliance that Julian felt they all needed. "Absolutely, Cameron," Julian said after appearing to have given the matter brief consideration. "You and any soldiers you wish to bring with you are more than welcome."

"Excellent," Cameron answered. He then turned to Rayce. "Get our

stuff out of the car, and call up Pat, Ringo, and Cabretti. Tell them they're staying here with us until tomorrow night, and have them bring some shotguns.

Rayce nodded and headed out the door. In the hall he ran into Sasha, walking along with Cash. Rayce and Cash both stopped dead in their tracks, immediately engaging in the stare-down that had become second nature to the two. Sasha simply looked from one to the other, trying to decide whether she should do anything. Finally she spoke, hoping she would be able to break the tension. "So, Rayce, what are you doing here?" Sasha asked cheerily, revealing just how little she understood the rivalry that the two kindred felt so intensely toward each other.

"Julian said a few of us Brujah could stay here during the day," Rayce replied, never taking his eyes from Cash.

"You're staying here?" the Gangrel asked, incredulous. "What the hell did you have to promise to get Julian to agree to that?" His words were dripping with venom as he flaunted the hatred he felt for virtually every Brujah in the city, most especially their new house guests, Cameron and Rayce.

"Sasha, could you leave the two of us alone for a second?" Rayce asked. She looked dubious for a few moments, and Rayce managed to break his lips into a smile, allowing Sasha to forget her concerns. "We just have a couple of issues to resolve," Rayce added, his tone playful, conveying none of the menace that Cash was certain he could hear in the words.

"Sure," Sasha gladly replied. "I'll be downstairs shooting some pool when you guys are done." Both kindred took a moment to watch Sasha walk down the stairs, each wondering how oblivious she would have to be to not understand the tension that existed between the two of them.

Once Sasha was out of sight, they again began their stare-down. After a couple of minutes, Rayce was the first to speak. "Do you want to move this somewhere else, or do we want to settle our differences outside the prince's study?"

"The library would be fine," Cash replied, leading the way down the hall and down the stairs to the library.

The room was quiet, unlike the rest of the building. Everywhere else could be heard the arming of weapons and the discussions of people planning defenses. I should be having some of those discussions, Cash thought, but instead I'm yapping with some arrogant Gangrel punk.

"I know why you don't like me, Cash," Rayce began as soon as the two had closed the door behind them. "It goes beyond the fact that for some reason the Gangrel have an obsessive hatred of Brujah in this city, or that our old primogen killed your sire, or that we've recently been champing at the bit to precipitate a clan war. It has only to do with Sasha, and that's too bad." Rayce leaned back against a bookcase, noting with amusement as he looked at the shelves that the first title he noticed was 'Romeo and Juliet.' "For years people like you and me have been able to call each other friends, but only until a woman gets in the way."

Cash just rolled his eyes in response. The entire speech reminded him of the lectures his father used to give him when he was a boy so many years ago. Rayce, however, ignored Cash's indifference and continued.

"The fact of the matter is that Sasha has come to me looking for friendship, due to the fact that you are always kept so busy," Rayce said, his tone revealing that he was not looking to make excuses for the situation. The Brujah actually seemed to be only stating facts. "If I were in your shoes I'd be happy. After all, I don't take her out robbing liquor stores or doing drive-by shootings."

"Yeah, thanks Rayce, I'm sure your influence is really great for her," Cash replied, not buying into any of the smooth words that Rayce had hoped would help ease their rivalry. Though Cash's sarcasm was impossible to overlook, Rayce made an effort to not respond negatively. It was important to his plans that he not have the primogen of the other clans holding negative opinions of him.

"Not that it's really any of your business, Cash, but Sasha ****is**** only a friend," Rayce added, beginning to doubt that he could make a difference in Cash's opinion of him by doing anything short of chopping his own head off. "We go out, visit museums, talk philosophyâ€ you know, all that great Brujah stuff," Rayce said, making one last attempt at convincing Cash that he was little like the rest of the Brujah in San Francisco.

"Forgive me if I'm just a little suspicious of what 'all that great Brujah stuff' includes," Cash replied, his sarcasm continuing. "I've seen too many of my friends get killed by your damn clan when it has fun doing its stuff."

"You have a lot of anger to work out, Cash," Rayce said, realizing that he had made as much progress as he could expect to in one night. "If it's any consolation, I don't hate your clan the way you seem to unreasonably hate mine. Members of the Gangrel clan helped many of the Brujah elders escape the flames of the Inquisition. Some of our clan remember. Maybe you should try to remember as well." With that Rayce strode out. He had many things to do before the sun came up, and a very short time to do it.

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V

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It had been twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours of waiting in some dingy motel room with nothing to eat. Mark leaned back against the wall in boredom and frustration for perhaps the fiftieth time that hour. Only forty-five minutes to go until the next hour starts, he thought. If only he were able to turn on the tv he could have amusement, but he knew Looks Within would never allow it. As if in answer to his thoughts, Looks Within opened his eyes.

"Why don't you turn on your devil-box, white man?" the shaman said seriously. He gestured to the television as he spoke.

"What?" Mark asked, shocked that Looks Within would want the tv on.

"Your television, turn it on," Looks Within repeated. "There could be important news we should know."

"You've never wanted the tv before, even for news," Mark replied, suddenly becoming suspicious of Looks Within's motives. He began to suspect that the shaman was trying to teach him another unsolicited lesson. "What's with you?"

"We are not yet ready to leave, so we can't get a newspaper," Looks Within replied matter-of-factly. "I want to know what is going on in the city out there. Don't they tell news or something on your devil-box?" Looks Within asked, although he was fairly certain that it was possible to find out current events on the tv. He remembered hearing about something called CNN. The shaman was gradually becoming significantly more animated as he spoke and it was obvious to Mark that Looks Within truly didn't want the television on at all. His desire to know what was happening around him had overridden his general distaste of Western culture's technology.

Mark began to move toward the tv, but before he could even reach it, James had grabbed the remote and tuned in to Sportscenter. "James, this isn't the kind of news that our friend had in mind," Mark said, reprimanding his packmate. James could tell from Mark's voice, however, that his heart was not into the scolding. James knew that Mark was probably as interested as he himself was in getting scores and highlights from the previous night.

"He has news he wants to know, and I have news I want to know," James replied, knowing that Mark would understand. James grinned and propped his wounded body up against the bed.

Both Looks Within and James were still injured, Mark knew. This was then not the best time to push either one of them, as they were more likely to give in to their feral natures. As much as Mark would have liked to keep the tv tuned to Sportscenter, he knew that a fight could easily result if he did not get James to turn on the local news.

"White man," Looks Within snarled, "get those foolish games off of your devil box. I wish to see real news."

"This is real news, savage," James replied, a smile still spread annoyingly on his face. "I want to know whether the 'Niners won last night." To reinforce his claim of the tv, James held up the remote and growled at Looks Within.

For his part, Looks Within looked suitably unimpressed. "Don't make me smack you, white man," he replied, his voice not strong enough to convey the true threat that he wished to convey. "These are not true games. My people have games that would astound you, not that you care. You came across our plains with your iron horse and stole our land. At one time, you could walk from one horizon to the other on the backs of the mighty buffalo, but you destroyed that. Why? You needed leather so you could make sporting goods. Such is the legacy of the white man — a legacy of lies and waste."

James turned off the television and turned to Looks Within. "If you hate us so much, why do you run with us?" the Irishman asked, hoping that the question would stump his packmate. James felt that deep

down, looks Within was actually jealous of everything that Western Europeans had accomplished. He just knew that the native American would never admit it.

"I do not hate you, devil worshipper," Looks Within replied, his tone becoming more sympathetic. "I feel a responsibility to you, to help ensure that you see the errors of your past, and lead better lives in the future. It is the red man's burden." Looks Within again glared at James, then continued. "If you change, we can defeat the wyrm. Besides, you amuse me, white man, what with your machines and silly traditions."

"What silly traditions?" James asked, startled by the accusation by looks Within, of all people, that his culture had silly traditions.

"St. Patrick's Day, Fianna," Looks Within replied immediately. The shaman grinned widely as he responded, knowing his response would irritate his Irish friend, who saw St. Patrick's Day as a holiday of religious significance.

"I'll let you go on that, Looks Within, but only because I know you're a bloody savage who doesn't understand our culture," James responded. He allowed the insult to pass for no reason other than the fact that he realized he was in no condition to try to rip out Looks Within's heart.

Mark finally stood up and interjected. "If you two have enough energy to banter this well, you have enough energy to leave this hotel." In response, both garou shifted from their crinos, or wolf-man from back into their natural forms, the forms that they had been born in. James reverted to human form, and Looks Within to his wolven form.

Kristen and Andrew, who had both purposefully been ignoring the conversation, suddenly became alert to what was going on. "Where are we going?" they asked in unison.

"We're gonna go somewhere you can get a few pounds of steak," Mark answered. "I'm hungry." At that they all got up and left.

CHAPTER 3

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I

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Julian awoke from his slumber with a start. He was still alive. He had never dealt with this kind of uncertainty about whether or not he would survive a crisis. Manzanita came close, he thought, but it was still different. That night he had been alone with Caitlin, attacked by three Brujah. He had been injured badly, and they had kept coming at him. Suddenly, however, he found himself surrounded by enemies, and yet and no one was coming at him. His foes, whoever they were, were making him wait. Perhaps the saying was right, he thought—anticipation of death is worse than death itself. Regardless, he had to be ready. He dressed quickly, and went to a chest in the corner. He looked at it for a few moments before he opened it.

After deciding he was ready, he unlatched the top and slowly lifted the lid, the squeaking of the chest's hinges giving testimony to how long it had been since Julian had opened it. Inside he found his old weapons, unused for years. Two .45 caliber pistols, his old shotgun, countless clips and rounds, grenades, a flack jacket, and a rapier he had used for staking his vampiric foes. He had to smile. Humans had their legends that a vampire could only be staked with wood. How foolish, he thought, when steel was actually a far superior substance. He arranged his weapons on the bed, and started to strap them all on.

It all felt so alien to him. So many years ago he had put these weapons away, swearing not to be the enforcer any longer. He had had enough of killing for Archon, but now the situation was different. He would be killing for himself. He was the prince, and his territory needed to be protected from whatever enemy it was that he was facing.

Downstairs in the library, Rayce was the antithesis of Julian's focused preparation for battle. He sat at a table, reading through a book that contained Marlowe's collected works. He enjoyed reading this particular play, depicting Faust's sale of his soul to the devil. For some reason, it reminded him of himself. I did not sell my soul to the devil, he reminded himself. A little of my freedom has been compromised, but it is all for the greater good of the Brujah clan. If only he could talk about it. He wanted to explain his purpose to Sasha, but she would never understand. Of course, Johnny knew a little, and probably suspected a great deal more, but he was no longer Brujah, and could not be trusted with the greatest of his secrets. Rayce felt alone, despite his conviction that his actions were correct. His mood changed, and he closed the book. Given his feelings, Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" would be more appropriate, he thought.

As he sought the book he knew would be there, the collected works of Shakespeare, his cellular phone rang. "Johnny?" he asked, opening the phone with a quick flick of his wrist.

"Have you given this number to anyone else?" Johnny asked, knowing Rayce's constant desire for privacy.

"Of course not," Rayce answered curtly, knowing that Johnny was well aware of Rayce's reluctance to make himself readily available.

"Then who else would it be?" Johnny asked rhetorically. "Listen, where are you?" the Telemon asked. Yashida's voice sounded particularly distant, even for someone on a cell-phone.

"Luna's mansion," Rayce replied evenly, as if he would have been anywhere else, considering the city's crisis.

"Well leave," Johnny replied, his voice sounding urgent. "I found the garou," Johnny added.

"How?" Rayce asked doubtfully, knowing garou were virtually undetectable until they transformed and attacked, at which time it was often too late to warn others of their presence.

"You know the Darkstars?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, it's an anarch gang from Oakland," Rayce replied quickly, wondering what an anarch gang from across the bay had to do with a pack of garou.

"Right," Johnny said, confirming the identity of the gang. "Well, last night I told them that Luna's in trouble, that they might be able to set up shop in San Francisco, which from what I hear is something they desperately want to do."

"I've heard that myself," Rayce said evenly, suddenly seeing where Johnny was going.

"So I figured they'd be the only kindred walking the streets, since they probably don't know that Julian has called for us to stay inside in groups somewhere," Johnny said, explaining the logic behind his latest plan. "Well, I followed the Darkstars for awhile, and they just got eaten by the garou," Johnny said, obviously proud of his success. "I'm following the pack right now."

"Are you crazy?" Rayce asked, quickly realizing that he had shouted the question into the phone. He made listened for a moment to see if anyone investigated his shouts, and when no one came into the library, the Brujah continued. "If they see you -"

"â€"Don't hassle it," Johnny replied, not sounding overly concerned. Rayce wondered whether Johnny's lack of fear was a sign of bravery or stupidity, and quickly decided on the latter. "They probably won't see me," Johnny assured his friend. "I'm flying above them right now. There are six of them. From what I know, I would guess at least three of their 'auspices' are represented. They're bad ass, Rayce. You gotta see them for yourself."

"So where are you?" Rayce asked, knowing that the best idea would indeed be for him to get a first-hand look at their foes.

"They're going into Golden Gate Park," Johnny replied. "I'll meet you just outside the park, on the east side."

"Fine," Rayce answered, closing the phone and putting it back in his pocket. The Brujah abandoned his search for the book, opened the window, and slipped out knowing no one would see him leave. How did I get myself into this, he wondered. I can't believe I'm going out alone to watch garou.

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II

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Caitlin paced from one side of her office to the other. She had so wanted to talk to Julian again since the other night, but he had been impossible to reach. His secretary, Cassandra, had informed her countless times that Julian was too busy with important matters to speak to anyone, including her. It was understandable, she thought. Someone had tried to kill him just a couple of nights ago, and though they missed Julian, the attackers had been able to kill off a substantial number of his bodyguards and set fire to his house. That would be enough to absorb anyone's attention. Still, she wished there were some way to find out exactly what had happened. Not

surprisingly, there had been a massive cover-up of the whole story. None of her sources were able to confirm any of the rumors she had heard. Officially, all she knew for sure was that there had been a fire. The gunshots and piles of bodies constituted no more than extremely unreliable hearsay.

A knock on the glass door of her office brought her back from her frustrating contemplation. She turned quickly toward the door, startled. A lone man stood outside, watching her intently. He was wearing a black leather trenchcoat, black jeans, a black silk shirt, black boots, and carried a black, highly ornate cane. A wide brimmed hat concealed most of his facial features, enhancing the shadow that fell like an eclipse across his face. He stood at least 6'4", she figured, and had to weigh over 230 pounds. With all she had seen on the streets as a reporter, it was not common for Caitlin to be nervous, but this man sent a shiver down her spine.

He continued to watch her, not making a move to actually enter the office. Only with great effort was she finally able to speak. "Yes?" she asked, trying not to sound nervous. She noticed immediately, however that her attempt failed miserably, as only half of the word escaped her dry throat.

The man simply gestured to the doorknob. Caitlin thought there was a questioning look on his face, but with the poor lighting she couldn't be sure. "Come on in," she answered. She would not have been able to stop him anyway, she figured. As he opened the door and entered, she looked desperately around the newsroom. Where was everyone? Even at this time of the night there were usually some reporters around. In fact, she couldn't remember ever seeing the newsroom empty in all her years at the paper.

"Miss Caitlin Byrne?" the man asked in a thick German accent. He was looking right at her, but still shadows somehow seemed to fall over at least half of his face.

"Yes," she answered. "That's me." Her confidence was starting to return. Despite his menacing appearance, the man seemed to be almost as uncomfortable in the situation as he made her feel.

"Ah, good," the man replied, an unsettling smile spreading slowly across his lips. "I was hoping I would catch up with you here." He sat down in the chair in front of her desk, and gestured for her to also be seated.

Perhaps he isn't as uncomfortable as I figured, she thought, noting the way her visitor seemed comfortable giving her commands in her own office. Caitlin took his direction and sat down behind her desk.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Miss Byrne," the man said smoothly, allowing a dramatic pause before he actually revealed his identity. Caitlin thought she saw his smile broaden, but was still unsure, due to the poor lighting. "My name is Heinrich Schacter," the man said in a tone that suggested he had already done Caitlin an amazing favor simply by revealing his identity. "You, however, may call me Henry. The name seems more familiar to Americans."

Caitlin thought she saw the smile become more congenial. He seemed to be making an attempt at being friendly, but every time she began to

let her guard down, his tone of voice would become slightly more menacing, or a movement of his body, ever so slight, would appear threatening. She was being kept completely off guard by her strange visitor.

"I wish this could be considered a social call, as I have long followed your work, and would love to speak to you about your inspirations for becoming a writer, but I am afraid that business must take precedence," Henry said, appearing sincere in his regret.

"You've followed my work?" Caitlin asked, unable to let go what might have been a compliment. There was still some part of her, after all these successful years, that loved being bathed in praise and recognition.

"For many years," Henry replied. "As I said, however, this is not the time for that discussion. I am here to ask you a few questions about some of the people in the city."

"Who did you have in mind?" Caitlin asked, not being accustomed to being used as an information source within the city. She started to feel like one of her own informants.

"Julian Luna, for one," Henry answered. Caitlin had expected Julian's name to come up. After all, it seemed only natural to her that Julian should somehow be connected with this man. Still, the mention of her boss and lover's name set her ill at ease.

"What, exactly would you like to know?" Caitlin asked, already making a mental checklist of things she would not divulge to her visitor.

Heinrich looked at her for a few moments before answering, and when he did it was with a slight grin played across his face. "I see, he is not only your boss, but your lover as well," he said slyly.

Caitlin instinctively let her face go blank, trying not to convey any more thought or emotion to this man, who seemed capable of reading her like an open book. "What?" she answered, failing to hide in her voice the surprise that she felt she had concealed in her expression.

"I have known a great many people in my lifetime, Miss Byrne," Heinrich said, his voice sounding somewhat apologetic. "I have been gifted, or cursed, if you will, with ability to read a person's true feelings and intentions. I meant no offense, I assure you. Indeed, if my words offend you, then perhaps he is not as important to you as I had thought."

Who was this man, she thought. He seemed as if he were playing her like a violin. "You did not offend me, Mr. Schacter," Caitlin responded, surprising herself with her willingness to make Heinrich feel more comfortable. "Your astuteness simply caught me off-guard. What exactly would you like to know about Julian? uh, Mr. Luna?" She tried desperately to make the conversation swing toward a more formal bent.

"Well, Ms. Byrne, I already know he is a prominent figure in the

criminal world of San Francisco, and that he has a great many legitimate business interests, as well," Heinrich began, keeping a close eye on Caitlin, searching her for reactions to anything he said. He noted that she was fairly adept at controlling herself. "I now also know that he is involved with you, although I can only imagine why, and I also know that he has recently been presented with, shall we say, some significant security problems." He leaned back in his seat, his scrutinizing gaze appearing to intensify.

"That's a great deal to know about someone whom I would assume you've never met," Caitlin answered coolly, hoping he would inadvertently give away some information as to his purpose in San Francisco. Heinrich smiled with her question, seeing her statement for what it was. He would not tell her any more than he wished to have her know, however. He had been playing such games for far too long to be taken by surprise by this small-time newspaper editor.

"I must confess, I follow the lives of many great businessmen, and Mr. Luna is simply one of that many," Heinrich answered, knowing that the slight bit of information he gave would keep Caitlin happy. "I keep tabs on them, watching to see, among other things, how they make and lose their money. It helps me in my own investing, you see. I watch successful investors who have gone before me, much as a general studies the exploits of great military leaders from history. It is not much different." Caitlin nodded as he spoke, indicating that she was thus far keeping up with the conversation. "Anyway, I have extensive files on these men, and a flag just appeared next to Julian Luna's name yesterday morning, so I wanted to see firsthand what was occurring."

He presented his story smoothly, Caitlin thought, but it was only a story. She had not become a successful journalist without being able to see when someone was holding something back. Despite this man's assured and deceptive demeanor, she was able to figure out there was something more to this. "That's very interesting," she replied. "I've never been that interested in finance, myself." If she could just get him talking, she thought, she might be able to figure out what he was truly after.

"That is unfortunate," he responded. "Why don't you tell me now, Ms. Byrne, everything you know about Julian Luna?" His eyes suddenly seemed to be free of the shadows around them, and almost seemed to glow with a crystal blue brilliance. She found herself unable to turn away, and was suddenly more than willing to share all of her most intimate knowledge of Julian with this man.

It felt as if she were talking, she realized, but she was unable to hear the words she was uttering. It was almost as if he were draining information directly from her mind without her even realizing what it was he was taking. In the back of her mind, she felt a presence in the room with her and Heinrich. She could not place it, but she was certain that the two of them were not alone. Part of her wanted to warn her visitor, but another part was certain that Heinrich knew the situation all too well. Deep within, Caitlin began to panic. She felt violated, but she was still uncertain why. Gradually the feeling started to fade, and her eyelids began to grow heavy, until the whole room went black.

"Ms. Byrne? Ms. Byrne?" Caitlin heard someone calling her name, as if

from far off. She did not recognize the voice, though. It was heavy with some kind of foreign accent. What was it, German? Yes, she decided, it must be German. Caitlin slowly opened her eyes, and saw Heinrich Schacter in the seat before her, leaning towards her. "Ms. Byrne, are you ok? I am sorry, I did not mean to put you to sleep with my boring talk of high finance. I find discussion of numbers to be quite diverting, and sometimes tend to forget that many do not share my passion."

Caitlin simply looked at him. What had he been talking about? Oh yes, his analysis of Julian as a businessman, and his concern that Julian may have gotten involved in something that could prove to be very costly. Boring conversation, she thought. It's no wonder I fell asleep. There was a nagging feeling in her head though, that they had discussed something else, but she was lost as to what it had been. Any other conversation they may have had, along with her suspicions of not having been alone with her visitor, faded from her mind like a dream when one wakes up in the morning.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you so late at night, Ms. Byrne," Schacter apologized. "You must be very tired. I myself am, sadly enough, still set to Berlin time. It is my only excuse." Her visitor stood up out of the chair and walked out through her door, seemingly in one fluid motion. He walked out through the newsroom and around a corner. Only moments later, Fred, one of her reporters, came around the opposite corner toward her office. He walked right up to the door and entered.

"Hi Fred. Where is everyone?" Caitlin asked.

"What do you mean, Caitlin, they're just letting us back into the building," Fred replied, surprised with Caitlin's question.

"What?" Caitlin asked, a puzzled look on her face.

"The fire alarm, Caitlin," Fred commented, as if he doubted that Caitlin could not have heard the alarm. "Have you been here the whole time?"

"Yeah, I didn't hear a fire alarm," Caitlin said. She wiped at her eyes, as if there was still some sleep that needed to be cleared away from her mind.

"How could you not have heard it?" Fred asked. "The damn thing's deafening." The reporter looked at her dubiously.

"I must have fallen asleep," Caitlin answered. That could be the only explanation for not hearing the alarm, she thought. Then, was that man really here, she asked herself. "Fred," she asked, "you doing anything right now?"

"No. Actually, I was about to head home," he replied. "Why, you need something?"

"If you don't mind, could you just give me a quick hand with something?" Caitlin asked, knowing full well that what she made sound like a small favor would likely turn into a all-night project.

"Sure, what do you need?" Fred asked, quickly grasping onto the

nature of the task he was accepting. In the back of his mind, Fred started to sort through menus from restaurants that he knew were open late and would deliver.

"I want you to help me see if we can find something about a man named Heinrich Schacter," Caitlin said.

"I'll get on it right now," he answered, heading back out the door. Caitlin watched him go, and tried to shake the feeling of confusion from her mind as she watched a few of the other reporters come into the newsroom, apparently after being evacuated for the fire. What the hell is going on around here, lately, she wondered.

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III

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The park was always a nice place to go to get away from the bustle of the city, Rayce thought. Tonight, however, the chances of getting oneself killed while getting away from the bustle were simply too great. He waited around for Johnny anxiously outside the park, too wary of the dangers within to enter alone. What the hell was taking him, he wondered. Perhaps the garou had discovered the small Telemon. If that had indeed occurred, there was little chance of Rayce ever seeing Johnny again. He was certain of that much. Although Yashida had been able to survive many battles with kindred, and supposedly an attack by a single garou, it was lunacy to even consider any kindred surviving an attack by a whole pack of the lupines.

"If you keep standing around like that, you're liable to get your head ripped off." Johnny laughed at Rayce as his friend looked up, seeing Yashida sitting on a tree branch above him.

"How long have you been there?" Rayce asked, embarrassed that anyone could have gotten so close, especially with him as focused on his surroundings as he had been.

"At least five minutes," Johnny replied, looking around before he continued. "You sure you wanna go in there?" he asked, gesturing towards the park. His question made Rayce know that Johnny was in no mood to go in himself.

He's probably looking for me to say we don't have to do this, Rayce thought. Normally I would call him a coward, but this time he's probably right. "We don't have much of a choice, Johnny. I have to see them."

"Why?" Johnny asked, his tone clearly betraying his reluctance. "I can tell you anything you want to know, I've been watching them for hours. Like I said, there are six of them. Two are still pretty cut up, but the others look like they're ready to go anytime."

Rayce pondered for a moment. Perhaps he didn't have to see them after all, he thought. Johnny was right. What information could he really glean by watching them from afar? The only way to learn a whole lot was to get close, to fight them again. There was no way he would do that voluntarily. It didn't matter much what his elders told him, he thought. If they want to get close to garou, they can go ahead, but

there's no way I'll do it. "You saw them attack the Darkstars?" Rayce asked, deciding that he would settle for hearing what Johnny had to say.

"Yeah, I watched the whole thing," Johnny responded.

"How good are they?" Rayce asked, unable to mask the combination of fear and curiosity in his voice. "I mean, I fought a couple of them at the mansion, and was lucky to escape, but are there any weaknesses you saw? Is there anything we can use against them?"

"You mean besides silver?" Johnny asked, grinning as he stated the obvious. "I don't see what, but then again I'm not trained in seeing obvious weaknesses in battle tactics or whatever. You'd have to ask just about anyone else in my clan. I just gather the info, I don't have to make heads or tails of it. I can tell you this, though. There were eight paranoid members of the Darkstars in that alley, expecting that an attack could come at any moment from Luna. Still, four out of those six garou were able to jump them and finish them off within maybe twenty, thirty seconds."

"They didn't even manage to injure the garou?" Rayce asked in disbelief.

"They shot them and stuff," Johnny answered. "But you know the lupines, that only made them mad." Yashida laughed to himself as he answered.

As if in response to his chuckle, a loud, drawn-out howl erupted from within the park, soon joined by numerous other howls. Rayce and Johnny glanced at each other, each doing a poor job of disguising their rising panic. Rayce then looked back into the park, wondering what the garou were doing that was getting them so worked up. After a moment he realized that discretion was the better part of valor, and decided to leave.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Rayce said looking up toward the tree. "Johnny?" he asked, looking for his friend.

"I'm over here!" he heard behind him.

Rayce turned around to see Johnny already at least a hundred feet away, getting on his motorcycle.

"You know my number if you need to talk, bud," Yashida yelled, starting up his motorcycle.

He's got the right idea, Rayce thought, as he also took off across the grass, racing toward his bike. Maybe it was possible for him to direct the lupines at Cameron, Julian, and Lillie, but would the garou stop there? What was more, what if the werewolves took out a bunch of other people that he didn't want to have die. After all, it would be unfortunate to lose Sasha, and he felt a debt to Cash and his clan. Daedalus fell into his plans very importantly, too, as he seemed to be the only one who could control the damn gossiping Nosferatu. Yes, while his plan offered great promise of success, it also contained perhaps far too many risks. The time may come, he thought, when I'll have to turn against the plans of my elders and warn Julian about what it is he's facing. After all, if he doesn't prepare properly, everyone in that mansion is going to get ripped to

shreds. That would pretty much mean no kindred left in San Francisco, and there would certainly be no point in ruling over an empty city.

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IV

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Julian stalked through the halls of his mansion with grim determination. He wanted to finally speak to Rayce about what had happened at the mansion those few nights ago, but he had been unable to ever get him alone. Now, he was certain that the young Brujah was somewhere in the house, and he wanted answers. He went through the building twice, not finding any trace of Cameron's enigmatic friend. Finally, Julian went up to Cameron, who was sitting in the bar with a couple of his bodyguards, watching a hockey game.

"Cameron, could I speak to you for a moment." The words were spoken as a statement, not a question.

Cameron caught the tone of Julian's voice, and cursed the prince mentally. Even when he asks for something, the Brujah primogen thought, he speaks as if it were a command. "What do you need, Julian?" Cameron's tone, in turn, was rather disinterested in whatever it was that Julian wished to discuss.

"In private, please, Cameron," Julian said. The uncompromising authority in his voice continued.

"Sure," Cameron replied absently. The Brujah stood up from his barstool and walked off with Julian to a table in a corner. "What do you want, Julian?" Cameron asked, his irritation seeming to grow. "You're making me miss a good game. Vancouver just got a power play."

"What do you know about Rayce, Cameron?" Julian asked intensely. "I want the whole truth, not just whatever it is you feel like letting me know." Julian looked very serious, Cameron thought.

"Perhaps you should just ask him yourself," Cameron suggested, wanting to get back to the game.

"I would, but he doesn't seem to be in the mansion," Julian responded. He noticed that Cameron did not seem overly surprised at the news. "Did you send him somewhere?"

The question threw Cameron off-balance. He had been sure that Rayce was around somewhere, though he had to admit that it had been a couple of hours since he had seen his friend. However, he did not want Julian to know that he was also in the dark as to Rayce's location. "I didn't send him anywhere, Julian. He's got to be here somewhere. You just missed him, that's all." Despite his words, Cameron knew that it was very possible that Rayce had decided to leave. He had always had an annoying habit of disappearing at crucial times.

"I seriously doubt it, Cameron," Julian replied. "So, tell me, what do you know about this man you have brought under my roof?" The

question was stated almost conversationally, leading Cameron to feel as if this was not quite the interrogation that he had initially felt that it was going to be.

"Well, Eddie sent me up to Seattle back in '91, and it was then that I met Rayce," Cameron said, sounding as if he was beginning what would be an incredible story. "At the time, if you remember, there was a clan war brought on by the Toreador grabbing control of the city."

"Yes," Julian responded, nodding. "Casper came into control for four years up there. It had a strong effect on the entire country, though. Seattle culture seemed to mature overnight, leading to the whole grunge craze. The record industry was revitalized for a time. Both Lillie and I made small fortunes."

"So I guess you were all broken up when the Ventrue took the city back in '95," Cameron said sarcastically.

Julian just stared at Cameron, ignoring his statement. It was not so much the fact that the Ventrue had taken control, but that only one month later, Brujah anarchs had overthrown the prince and established another one of their free states. Although Cameron hated the anarchs as much as anyone else in the city, he was overjoyed to get Julian to think about how a Ventrue prince had fallen to the independence and vitality of the Brujah clan.

"Anyway, during this war, it was made clear that outside kindred were not safe in the city," Cameron said, continuing with his story. "I had to go to bring a certain important message personally to Roger MacGruder, a prominent Brujah. On my way out of the city, I was jumped by a bunch of Gangrel, big surprise, and Rayce came to my aid. He helped me get out of the city alive."

"So then can it be assumed that Roger knows a little about our guest that I can find out?" Julian asked, taking any opportunity to follow up on Cameron's information.

"Probably not," Cameron answered with a look of false disappointment on his face. "Rayce claimed to be from New Orleans, which he left soon after being embraced. He said it was too chaotic a scene down there. He apparently never notified the prince in Seattle that he was living in the city, and wound up coming here as soon as I had control of the Brujah. I remembered him, and thought he could probably help me out. He's lessâ€¦ impulsive than most Brujah. He makes a good advisor."

Julian nodded. "He does seem more controlled," Julian agreed. "He might may indeed make an excellent advisor, if he can be trusted."

"Don't worry about it Julian," Cameron said with a set face. "I trust him, and you don't generally have to deal with him. It's my problem, not yours." Cameron stood up and walked back over to the mahogany bar to join his clanmates.

No, Cameron, with him as close to Sasha as he's been, Rayce is my problem too, Julian thought. He got up and walked up the stairs, hoping to find his "niece."

In her room, though, Sasha was in no mood to be spoken to. She paced from one end of the small room to the other, her anxiety rising slightly with every step. She heard a knock and turned toward the fine oak door, the fifth one she had had since moving in. She had destroyed the others during frenzy, and once again the idea of ripping through wood was starting to appeal to her.

"Sasha, are you in there?" It was Cash's voice. "Sasha, let me in."

"Go away, Gangrel!" Sasha hissed. The words were spat through the fangs that had revealed themselves within her mouth.

The door opened, despite Sasha's apparent desire that it stay closed, and Cash slowly stepped in. "Sasha, what's wrong?" Cash asked, understanding that in her irrational state, Sasha could feasibly be raging about anything, from her anxiety over the situation in the city, to the fact that Vancouver had just scored another power play goal. He spoke slowly, knowing that she was once again on the verge of frenzy. That damn Brujah blood, he thought. She's always ready to fly off the handle.

"I told you to go away, Cash," Sasha muttered through clenched teeth. The words were spoken menacingly, with every syllable pronounced purposefully. She glared at him with yellow eyes, her rage becoming more and more apparent.

"I just wanted to see how you were doing, what with everything that's going on," Cash replied slowly, trying to make his voice sound as calming as possible. "Come sit down."

Cash sat down cross-legged on the floor and looked up at Sasha. As she looked at him, sitting in a rather immobile position, helpless against any attack she might decide to launch, Sasha licked her lips. Her desire to rip his heart out and eat it began to rise within her. Cash still sat there, though, appearing harmless and innocent. After a few moments, he smiled, and Sasha found herself inexplicably beginning to calm down. She gathered herself, and the voice of reason began to once again assert itself within her mind. The rage gradually began to recede, though Sasha could feel a dim ember of fury still burning within her, as always. Such was the curse of the Brujah blood. A couple of minutes later Sasha had calmed to the point where she was able to sit down next to her lover.

"You really should stay away when I get like that," she said, her concern obvious. Cash could hear the slight tinge of embarrassment in Sasha's voice, and took it as a good sign. At least she understands that her behavior is unacceptable, he thought.

"I can take care of myself," he replied, trying to deflect Sasha's concerns. "So, are you ok?"

"I don't see the sense in staying here," she answered. "From what I've heard about the Sabbat, they're terrible. Why wait for them to show up?"

"This way we can fight them on our terms," he answered smoothly. "Besides," he continued, "if we can't beat them when they attack here, we won't be able to defeat them out there."

"Wouldn't it be better to surprise them out there, and not shoot up the mansion in the battle?" Sasha asked, a puzzled look on her face.

"Yes, it would," Cash responded, impressed that she seemed to have actually thought the whole situation through. "We don't know where they are, though. If we find out, we'll attack them."

"Oh." Sasha and Cash sat there for a few moments more, looking at each other, and then Sasha continued. "So do you think we'll win?"

"Yeah," Cash answered, nodding. "We'll win. Julian has a lot of money to buy good weapons, and he's a strong prince. We'll win," he repeated, the confidence evident in his voice.

"I'm afraid," Sasha said, moving closer to him, grabbing his arms and wrapping them around her. What she was unable to express, however, was that her fear was of more than just the enemies that everyone in the mansion was sure they would face. Her fear was also of herself. Ever since her embrace, Sasha had been incapable of controlling her emotions. The scene of her almost attacking Cash had occurred several times before, and she knew that one day she might actually lash out. She allowed herself to relax slightly in his arms, trying to find comfort in the moment. For Sasha, the moment was the only time she could ever count on having security and peace. Life had become too unpredictable.

"I'll protect you if you need it, Sasha," Cash said, attempting to reassure his lover. His words, although meant to comfort, immediately seemed to have had the opposite effect.

"Protect me? How can you protect me?" Sasha asked, her voice betraying a rich combination of panic and fury. The fire was back in her voice, her anger seeming to possess a tangible expression in the deep yellow glow of her eyes. "You're going to be protecting Uncle Julian," Sasha spat, seeming to accuse Cash of some great crime. She felt that all of Cash's words had been meaningless, that he had only wanted to play mind games with her. She saw no true desire in him to go out of his way to protect her. "You're the prince's bodyguard, remember? You're not going to help me, you're going to leave me to be eaten by the Sabbath!" Sasha screamed, her words dripping with venom and the pain of betrayal. She was out of Cash's arms and on her feet before he could react. Sasha threw the door open, and bolted out, right into the arms of Julian, who had decided to wait outside Sasha's door when he heard the voices in her room.

"Sasha, what's wrong?" he asked, knowing that she was already well on her way to frenzy.

Her only response was to throw him off of her, into the wall. She raced off down the hall, down the stairs, and out the door. Julian raced after her, being joined by Cash. As they both reached the door, they saw her tear out on her motorcycle, leaving the estate.

"Sasha!" Julian yelled. "Come back here!"

She continued on, oblivious to the calls of her uncle, the prince. All she knew was that she needed to get away. She needed to get out

of the prison that she was sure would be the place of her death should she stay. Sasha was afraid, and needed the feeling of having someone there to protect her. Cash couldn't do it, she knew. His primary responsibility was to protect Julian. Rayce could help her, though. She knew that. He had saved her the last time the Sabbath had attacked, and he would do it again. She had been coming in the library when he had left through the window. She was sure he had not seen her catch him leaving. She had to find Rayce, she knew. Only he could help her feel safe.

Behind her, standing at the door, Julian and Cash both felt helpless. There was no way to catch up with her, they knew that. They would have to hunt her down and bring her back. Julian thought as quickly as he could, seeking a solution to this newest problem. Who could he send to bring Sasha back? Anyone he sent was in as much danger as she was. The situation was almost impossible to deal with.

As if in answer to his thoughts, Cash spoke up. "Let me go after her Julian. I'll bring her back."

Julian looked at him, the pain evident in his eyes. "No, Cash, let her go," Julian responded, defeat evident in his voice.

"What?" Cash asked, incredulous. He could not believe that Julian was willing to throw Sasha's life away so freely. "The Sabbath is probably out there somewhere," Cash added, reminding Julian of facts he already knew all too well. "She's all alone, and too young. She's a sitting duck if they find her."

"I will not risk anyone else, Cash," Julian muttered. "I can't, there are precious few of us left as it is," Julian added, reminding Cash of the slaughter at the mansion only a few nights earlier.

Cash nodded, accepting Julian's order, but only with the greatest effort. He knew the difficulty of the decision that Julian had just made. He stalked off, though, hoping that Sasha would be alright without anyone to protect her. She had never seen battle before, and would probably not survive her first unless she had someone to back her up.

"Julian!" Cassandra yelled from inside. He bolted in through the doors and went straight up to his office, knowing that is where she would be sitting. Cassandra was holding out the phone as the prince ran in. "Julian, there's a call for you."

"Not now, Cassandra," irritated that he had been brought into the mansion for something so trivial. "I told you I wasn't going to take any calls."

"You'll want to take this one," she replied. Her usually quiet, obedient demeanor was completely giving way, and she handed him the phone and left the room, closing the door behind her.

"Hello?" Julian asked into the phone, curious as to who had caused that reaction in Cassandra.

"Julian," the male voice began. "You probably have no idea who this is, do you?"

The voice slowly started to sound familiar, its formal tone with a

slight sense of menace and authority becoming unmistakable. "Cyrus," Julian answered. "What do you want?" The coincidence was too much for Julian. Why else would Cyrus be calling, he thought, but to get me to surrender my city or suffer further attacks from him?

"Let's cut through the bullshit, Julian," Cyrus said. "No formalities are asked for or given. You've been attacked, apparently by the Sabbat. I have no idea how many you lost, but I want to send you some of my people to help."

"What?" Julian asked incredulously. "You expect me to let some of your soldiers into my city?" Julian asked. He couldn't believe the nerve of the Brujah prince. True, Cyrus had been able to take Los Angeles, but he would not take San Francisco so easily.

"Julian," Cyrus responded, "the Sabbat is as much a threat to me as it is to you. If San Francisco falls, they'll be in my city within two years. That's completely unacceptable. We have a chance to crush them here and now."

"I don't need your help, Cyrus," Julian reiterated, refusing to even consider Cyrus' offer.

"You're too proud to accept it, you mean," Cyrus said. "Or is it that you think I'm behind these attacks? Is that it?"

"Would you blame me for suspecting you?" Julian answered. "You've already expressed an interest in consolidating all of California under your rule. Why not start in San Francisco? It has the virtue of being the only city that won't present you with anarch difficulties."

"I can imagine a similar conversation taking place in New York a while back," Cyrus replied. "Afraid of the Philadelphia prince's motivations, the New York prince refuses aid. As a result, both cities fall to the Sabbat. That won't happen here, Julian. I'm offering you twelve of my people, six from my clan and six from yours. That should set your mind at ease."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Julian asked, completely shocked at the revelation. The man who was offering him aid had not long before hired an Assamite to assassinate him. Julian had a hard time accepting such things. Julian began to accept that Cyrus may be on the level, however, and he was suddenly unable to make a decision as to what to do.

"Yes, Julian, I'm serious," Cyrus replied. "I can have them there by tomorrow night." It was only then that Julian began to detect a hint of desperation in Cyrus' voice.

"Ok, Cyrus," Julian relented. "Send them. Only twelve, and they leave when this is all over."

"Please, Julian, I'm not going to take your city under the guise of aiding you," Cyrus replied. "I would never be able to take any other cities if I did that with you. They should be at your place by two a.m. tomorrow."

"Alright" Julian responded. He waited for a few seconds before finishing. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me with words, Julian," Cyrus said, the desperation gone from his voice, suddenly replaced by his more characteristic menace. "You simply owe me a favor someday."

With that, Julian hung up the phone. What had he come to, accepting help from Cyrus in order to hold his city? Cyrus had been right, though. If the Sabbath took San Francisco, it would not be long before they were knocking on the doors of Los Angeles.

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V

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The Streets were surprisingly empty, Sasha thought as she rode her bike at breakneck speed. By the time she realized where she was, an hour had gone by. The frenzy now fading from her mind, she turned her bike back along the way she had come. She desired familiar surroundings, and that meant Chalkers. The pool hall had started to become like a second home to her, and there were always people around. She would be safe. In fact, she might even be able to feed, if she was very careful.

About five minutes later she arrived, seeing the usual crowd standing outside the place. In the late hours, the businessmen that frequented the establishment after a long day of work began to mix with the late-night college and high school student crowd, making for a unique blend of personalities. No Brujah anywhere to be seen, though, she thought. She hoped to find Rayce there, to surprise him by just showing up. While it would be unlike him to be in a place like Chalkers, she had gone in there a few times with him, so he at least he knew where it was. If he's not here, she thought, I can call his cell-phone. It would ruin the surprise, though.

Sasha strode between the tables, catching the eye of many of the teenage boys that hung around, acting as if they were tougher and more mature than they actually were. As much as their behavior amused her, she had to admit that there was a reason why this was a prime Brujah 'recruitment' location. There were more independent-minded youths under this one roof than in many other locations in town.

It didn't take Sasha long to realize that Rayce was not there. She gave a quick thought to feeding, and just before she officially quit on that idea, she spotted a man standing alone in a corner, gazing intently at her. When he realized she had noticed his stare, he quickly averted his eyes back to the pool table in front of him, pretending that all of his attention was focused on finding a good shot.

She looked him up and down and immediately came to the conclusion that he didn't belong there. He was probably about thirty years old, perhaps a little older. He stood a good bit over six feet tall, and was extremely well built. She could tell that even under the black clothes that he wore. The black ensemble was quite a contrast, she thought, to his blonde hair, fair skin, and blue eyes. Sasha started to feel a stronger and stronger desire to go over to the man and speak to him.

She slowly walked through the hall, consciously swaying her hips the whole way. As she got closer, she began to become more and more uneasy. Something about him was significantly not right. She had felt from across the pool hall that he was a little unsure of himself, a perfect target for feeding. Now that she was almost next to him, she sensed that it was in fact the opposite of her impression "that he was in fact terribly sure of himself. She was standing against his table, and knew that he could see her. He had to know she was there, she thought, but he had not yet looked up to acknowledge her presence. It was almost as if he had expected her to walk over to him.

He took a shot, and talked to her without looking up. "So, what is it you saw over here that made you come over?" he asked. He spoke with a thick German accent, she noticed. Without waiting for an answer, he proceeded to take his next shot. She backed up against a wall, suddenly very uncomfortable. From the back of her mind, though, came the words of Julian. 'Never let your prey intimidate you,' he had said. Easier said than done, she thought, but she nonetheless committed herself to taking control of the situation.

"I saw you shooting pool all by yourself back here, and figured that I had to come over here and get to know you better," she said in a flirtatious tone. She tilted her head and shifted her feet underneath her, trying to look both cute and seductive at the same time.

Finally he diverted his attention away from the table and toward her, looking her over head to toe. Sasha felt uncomfortable, as if he were undressing her with his eyes. "Yes, you will do," he said.

"What?" she answered incredulously.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Eighteen," she answered, her uneasiness increasing once again. Although he was reacting as she had hoped, she was no longer certain she would want to get him alone anymore. She wasn't sure it was that important to her to feed.

"Would you like to go somewhere?" he asked.

"Sure," she answered uneasily. As he picked up a trenchcoat, hat, and cane, and proceeded to leave the establishment, Sasha decided that this man must have thought she was a prostitute. He strode right out, not bothering to pay, she noticed.

He walked out to the sidewalk and a brand new BMW sitting by the curb. He opened the passenger-side door, holding it open for her to get in. She smiled as she climbed into the car, and he closed the door behind her. Moments later, he was getting in the car, and started it up. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said looking somewhat embarrassed. "I never even introduced myself. My name is Henry Schacter. I'm here in the city on business."

Like I care what your name is, Sasha thought. You're no more than the vessel carrying my next meal. She smiled, though, concentrating on acting polite. "Hi, my name's Sasha." She couldn't wait until they were out of direct view, so that she could just feed and leave this weird man to the night.

"I was in that pool hall all night," he said. "I thought someone like you would never come in."

"Really," she answered, more than a little disgusted at the man's crudeness. Yes, she decided, he thinks that I'm a prostitute.

"So tell me, Sasha, how bad is Julian's situation?" Henry asked, completely catching Sasha by surprise.

"What?" she asked, shocked. Suddenly a wave of sickness washed over her.

"What's wrong, Sasha, you not feel well?" Heinrich asked. "Perhaps you drank some tainted blood of some kind. You should be more careful. There's always the chance of that happening, you know."

She had heard stories of alcohol and drugs having an effect on kindred when they fed on mortals, and even some poisons that had caused a kindred to suffer when they fed from a mortal who had a toxin in his system, but she had never heard of pain that was anything like what she was experiencing. Sasha looked at Henry, terrified now, realizing that he may in fact be one of the Sabbat. She had been so foolish, she realized. There were enemies of Julian's all over the city, and she hadn't even tried to shake hands with this man to see if he was warm or cold. This mistake would probably cost her her life, she realized.

"Do not be afraid, Sasha. I'm not going to hurt you, I simply need you to a favor for me," Heinrich said, trying to put her at ease. Henry pulled his BMW over to the curb and turned to her. "Look at me, Sasha."

She responded to his command by burrowing her face into the car seat, using her hair to help conceal her. "Sasha, you can trust me, really." Even as he spoke, she realized, the pain was beginning to leave her body. She prepared to lash out at him, but had to stop herself for a moment so that she could listen to his voice. She had to admit that it truly was a gentle, melodious voice. His accent was almost hypnotic. She looked up at him, and felt as if she were held transfixed.

"Look at my eyes, Sasha," Heinrich commanded, and Sasha immediately complied. "What do you see there? Do you see menace? Do you think I could possibly hurt you?" She looked at him, and had to admit that he looked harmless enough.

"What do you want?" she asked. She felt herself transfixed by his gaze.

"I just want you to tell me everything that has happened so far," he said gently. "Who is attacking Julian?" Heinrich asked.

Sasha's eyes glazed over, and she seemed to be gathering all of the information in her mind before speaking. "Well, all I know is I was out, and Joey got killed. So Rayce and I went home, but the mansion was attacked. We got away, and then he took me home, and I've been there ever since, like a prisoner, until I left tonight." She spilled out the essence of the whole story without a second thought. It seemed perfectly natural to tell this stranger everything that had

been going on.

"Who attacked the mansion?" Henry asked. "Did you see who they were?"

"No," she answered with conviction. Something in her voice, however, quivered when she spoke. Few others would have noticed that, Henry thought. "Sasha, open your mind to me, ok?"

"Sure," she answered. They both sat there for a few moments, and then Henry finally spoke. "Garou," he muttered.

"What?" Sasha asked.

"Nothing," he responded. He knew that she would still never consciously remember what she had seen that night the garou attacked, and he didn't want to let her catch on. This man Rayce, though, had taken great pains to ensure that she would never remember their attackers. He had been thorough, Henry thought. It's too bad he'll never be able to be a master, like me.

Henry pulled away from the curb, taking Sasha back to the pool hall. "I need you to do one more favor for me, Sasha." Henry said.

"What?" she asked, somewhat groggy.

"I need you to call me if you find out anything important, ok?" he asked. "Just keep an eye on your uncle, and tell me what happens, ok?"

"Sure," Sasha answered. What a nice guy, she thought. Despite the outrageous favor he asked, it all seemed to be so normal to her.

He pulled into the parking lot at Chalkers, and wrote his number on a small card. "Slipping it in her pocket, he reminded her, "Remember Sasha, call me if anything major happens."

She nodded her head as she got out of the car and walked over to her motorcycle smiling. Henry pulled away from the lot, now having some answers, all of which unfortunately raised a very serious question. How was he to find a pack of garou in San Francisco?

**

VI

**

Peter Boland walked into the Holiday Inn with an air of comfort around him. Indeed, he had been spending most of his adult life in one hotel or another, far from the rectory in Dublin which was his official home. He strode over to the check-in desk, seeing the half-asleep employee look at him in surprise. No, he thought, they probably don't have priests normally check in at 4 o'clock in the morning. It would go against our normally prim and proper reputation.

He walked up to the desk. "I'm here to check in," he said evenly. No friendly chatter or smiles were offered. Peter had become what he

liked to think of as a focused professional, and he was in San Francisco on some of the most important business he had seen in over ten years. Nothing that did not have a bearing on his mission would receive much of his attention.

"Name?" the clerk asked with a big smile. It made sense that the man would smile, Boland thought. I'm probably the first person he's seen for a few hours. Boland's intense demeanor softened a bit as he realized he could brighten up the clerk's night a bit. Few people ever found any amusement in working the graveyard shift, and Boland imagined that was even truer in a hotel. Generally speaking, if the clerk heard from anyone at four in the morning, it was probably because the person had a complaint. If all went well, the clerk would not see any of the other people in the building.

"Father Peter Boland," the priest replied, giving his name. He allowed a soft smile to cross his face.

"Ah, here we go," the man replied, looking over the computer screen. "So what brings you to San Francisco?"

"A convention of sorts," Boland replied evenly. Although he was making an effort to be a little more congenial than usual, he was in no mood to expound overly much on the nature of his business.

"Really?" the clerk continued, as he withdrew a key from the wall behind him. "Any group I've ever heard of?" he asked, obviously relishing the opportunity to make conversation.

"I doubt it," Boland replied. Given the covert nature of his associates, he would have been astounded, and somewhat concerned, if the clerk were to know of Boland's occupation.

"Oh yeah? Who are they?" the clerk asked, continuing to make small talk as he made sure the key was the right one for Boland's room.

"The Society of Leopold," Boland responded, looking for any reaction in the young man across from him. Seeing none, he allowed himself to relax.

"Never heard of them," the clerk said, confirming Boland's conclusion. Peter simply nodded in response. "Enjoy your stay in San Francisco Father," the clerk said with a smile as he handed the key to the priest.

"Thank you," Peter muttered under his breath. There would be nothing about this particular trip to enjoy.

"Oh, Father Boland," the man called from behind him. "I almost forgot, you have a message waiting for you." The clerk dug out a slip of paper and handed it to Boland as he crossed back across the room to the desk.

"Thank you," Boland said politely as he took the message and walked back across the lobby.

As he got on the elevator, Boland opened the note that had been sent to him. He recognized the handwriting immediately, knowing the letter

had been sent by Brother Venturi. All it said was "Meet for dinner at 9 at The House of Nanking â€" 919 Kearny." Excellent, Boland thought â€" Chinatown. The crowds would prevent anyone from picking them out.

The elevator stopped and Boland walked down the hallway. The hotel manager had done well. He had a room on the top floor, at the end of the hallway, on the west side of the building. The sun shining in the window at sunset would help him wake up. As the priest walked into the room he placed the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door, which he hoped the maid would notice. The last thing he wanted was to be awakened in the middle of the day. He would probably need as much sleep as he could get.

He threw his bags on the bed and opened the larger of the two, producing a crossbow, followed shortly by a Japanese wakizashi. These were the tools of his trade. He had been waging his unofficial war against the enemies of the Church for thirty years now. He looked up, catching his reflection in the mirror. Time had been kind to him, he thought. He was still large and somewhat muscular, though his age showed in a head of gray hair.

Boland sat down on the bed and opened his Bible, a practice born out of years of habit. The words helped him calm down before going to sleep. He looked over the page he had randomly opened to. "Though I walk in the valley of darkness I fear no evil." He chuckled at the coincidence. Perhaps the boss is trying to tell me something, he thought. Once again he felt blessed, as he often did before he went to sleep. Ever since the first time he had encountered a vampire and destroyed it, Boland had felt that he was one of God's chosen warriors, a soldier in the fight against the dark forces that would destroy God's creation. As he always did, Boland said a prayer of thanks for the trust that he felt god had placed in him, and he asked for the strength to be able to carry on in his vocation.

With that he laid down, hoping to get to sleep before the sun came up and brightened the room a slight bit. Over the years, his eyes had become more accustomed to darkness until they were slightly light sensitive. I become like that which I hunt, he thought. There was still one major difference, though. He took comfort in the thought that he would find a place in heaven, while the vampires he dedicated his life to destroying would never find such peace.

**

VII

**

Julian paced his study, growing as restless as he was sure Sasha had been. Damn that girl, he thought. Why couldn't she just simply follow instructions like everyone else? True, she had Brujah blood in her and was thus prone to fits of disobedience, but she seemed to take it to extremes. Perhaps he just noticed more with her, he thought.

He heard the door open downstairs, and heard Sasha yelling. Julian raced out of the study and stood at the top of the stairs, watching as Cash fought once again with Sasha. Actually, he thought, she seems to be fighting with him as he once again he bites his tongue.

Sometimes he marveled at the restraint that the Gangrel primogen was able to show.

"All I'm saying is that you should consider the results of your actions before you just race off," Cash said, vainly trying to talk some sense into Sasha.

"Are you saying that I'm stupid?" Sasha screamed. "Are you implying that I never think before I do anything?"

"Of course not," Cash continued with a calm voice. "All I'm trying to get you to understand is that your uncle has been worried sick. You should have considered his reaction to your taking off."

"Oh, fine, dad," she yelled. "I guess I'll just go to my room now."

Sasha pushed Cash out of the way as she walked toward the stairs. She paused for a second when she saw Julian standing at the top, but then continued up, walking past him as if he weren't even there. A few of the guests snickered as she strode down the hall and into her room.

A few moments later Cash was in her doorway. "Did the night air help you settle down?" he asked, hoping he could find out what she had been up to.

"What?" she asked, still obviously angry. Any rage she seemed to have started to control had returned.

"You were all nervous before about staying here, but you seem ok now," Cash continued in a soft voice. "I figured the night air did you some good."

"Not that it's really any of your business," she answered, "but I only came back because I need a place to stay for the day. The sun will be coming up soon, in case you hadn't noticed." Cash nodded in response. "I still think it's foolish to stay here, though."

"We should be ok now," Cash answered. "Cyrus is sending help from LA. It seems like he's as terrified of the Sabbat taking San Francisco as we are. With another dozen kindred we should be able to hold off the Sabbat."

"Really?" Sasha asked, suddenly feeling better about their chances of survival.

"Yeah, really," Cash replied, seeing how happy the news made his lover.

"Could you leave me alone for awhile, Cash?" Sasha asked as she lay back on the bed, closing her eyes. "I just want to get myself together, and then I'm going to apologize to my uncle."

"Sure," Cash responded. He felt it was good to see her finally act more mature, taking responsibility for her actions and the effect that they had on others. He got up and walked out. "You want me to close the door?"

"Please," Sasha said. "And tell Julian I'll talk with him a little

before I go to bed."

"Sure thing," Cash replied. He closed the door as he walked out, and Sasha quickly rose and rushed to lock it behind him.

There was no telling how long she would have before someone else decided to talk to her. She raced over to the phone and started to dial the number that Henry had given her earlier in the night, grateful for the separate phone line her uncle had allowed her to have. The phone hadn't even finished ringing once when it was answered.

"Hello, Sasha," came Heinrich's voice from the other end of the line, his accent helping to calm Sasha even further. "What news do you have for me?" he asked, getting directly to the point of the call.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"You are the only one special enough for me to give my number to," he responded evenly. The words made Sasha feel important, strengthening the trust that she already had placed in her new friend.

"Julian is getting help from Cyrus in LA," Sasha said quickly, hoping that the news was important enough to have disturbed her friend. "He's sending a dozen of his soldiers to help out in fighting the Sabbat."

"The Sabbat?" Henry asked, initially surprised to hear them mentioned. He suddenly realized the deceptions that were being played out against the prince. "Oh yes, the Sabbat," Heinrich said, smoothly covering up his surprise. "Evil bunch. It's a good thing Julian has been able to get help. Do you know when they will arrive?"

"No," Sasha responded with obvious disappointment. She decided she would have to be more thorough in gaining knowledge in the future. "When I left earlier, though, there was no mention of these guys, so they had to have made the deal while I was out. If they're not here yet, it probably won't be until tomorrow night, at the earliest."

"Yes," Henry responded. "Thank you, Sasha. You must go now before you are found out."

"Yeah. Bye, Henry." Sasha hung up the phone, only to have someone knock at the door a split second later.

"Who is it?" she asked, thanking the fates that she had gotten off the phone in time.

"Rayce," came the answer from behind the closed door.

"Oh, hold on." Sasha crossed the room and opened the door to see Rayce standing there, looking grim.

"Come on in," she offered. Sasha sat on the middle of her bed, and gestured for Rayce to join her. He remained standing, however. Rayce viewed his visit as a business matter, and not a social call.

"I heard you went out, tonight," he said, his tone revealing his disappointment in Sasha's poor judgement.

"Yeah, I needed some air," she answered with a grin, ignoring the fact that she knew Rayce was displeased. She hoped that Rayce would be able to understand how she had felt. After all, she thought, he seems to understand everything that goes through my mind.

"You shouldn't have left, Sasha," Rayce said, revealing that he would not even try to understand. "It's more dangerous out there than you can understand. You're not ready yet to do battle with non-humans."

"Listen to you," she said accusingly. "You went out, too. I saw you slip out of the library." Rayce cursed himself for having been careless enough to have gotten caught by a neonate, but he deftly hid his reaction from Sasha.

"That's different," he said, knowing that Sasha would never be able to grasp the difference. In her mind, the two of them were incredibly similar. As far as Sasha knew, any risk that Rayce could safely take would never have been too dangerous for her.

"How is it different?" Sasha asked, growing more agitated. She felt as if she was being reprimanded by her uncle.

"First of all, I'm older than you," Rayce said, deciding that he should at least make an effort at explaining the difference, though he doubted it would help any. "I've seen battle before and I understood the risk I was taking. Second of all, I had somewhere to go."

"Oh, and where the hell did you go?" Sasha asked. "I looked around for you at all the usual spots and didn't find you."

"No," Rayce answered. "You probably wouldn't have. You were checking in all the usual Brujah spots, I assume." Sasha missed the amusement in Rayce's voice as he spoke.

"Where else would I go?" Sasha answered, almost dumbfounded.

"In case you haven't noticed, I don't frequent those places," Rayce answered, hardly able to conceal his distaste for the habits of San Francisco's Brujah. "Pool halls and biker bars aren't exactly my scene. I was at the Minna Street Gallery. A friend of mine had an exhibit opening tonight. He's really talented. I think I'm going to suggest that the Toreador embrace him."

"Oh really?" Sasha asked, seeming unimpressed with Rayce's not so wild lifestyle. She already seemed to be tiring of the conversation.

Outside the room, Cash came up and heard Rayce's voice. Despite his better judgment, he found himself listening to the conversation, a small part of him increasingly jealous that Sasha never seemed to yell at Rayce, while every word Cash ever heard seemed to be spoken with venom.

"If you wanted to find me, Sasha, you should try calling me," Rayce suggested. "I do have a cell-phone," he reminded her, his tone slightly condescending. "It would have been nice to have you along."

"It would have ruined the surprise, thoughâ€¦ If I found you, that is," Sasha replied. Had she still been mortal, she would have blushed at the way Rayce was looking at her.

"We have to talk seriously Sasha," Rayce said, finally getting to the topic that he had come to talk to her about.

Sasha's expression instinctually became revolted when she heard the serious tone of Rayce's voice, but quickly turned happy as she considered the possibilities held by his words. Outside the door, Cash felt anger rising within him. He hadn't been taken in by Rayce's smooth denials, and now he would hear the truth of Rayce's motivations come out.

"There could be an attack here, Sasha," Rayce began, his tone becoming gravely serious. "If that happens, you have to promise me something."

"What?" she asked, looking puzzled.

"You have to find Cash and stay with him," Rayce said. He saw the surprised look on Sasha's face and almost smiled in amusement. That had been the last thing Sasha had expected him to say.

"Cash will be protecting Julian," Sasha pointed out. "I think I should stay with you." She grinned, showing her obvious preference of companion in the forthcoming battle.

"Cash won't have a chance to protect Julian," Rayce replied, knowing that the garou who would be attacking would go directly for the prince. The strategy would be that in cutting off the head, they would kill the body. "They'll make the prince their first target," Rayce said, revealing his thoughts to Sasha. Or at least the second, Rayce thought, knowing that the real reason the garou had come was to extinguish Cameron. If only they knew that the real villain in the killing of the Gambioni children had been Da Costa, one of Cameron's competitors during the Brujah war for control. Not that it mattered. Cameron probably would have killed the children himself if it had occurred to him. It had been easy to frame him, Rayce thought, and the best thing was that not only did Cameron not know he was considered guilty of the crime, he honestly had no idea it had even happened.

Sasha looked at him, obviously in distress. "You think they'll go after Uncle Julian first?"

"What else do you think they're here for, Sasha?" Rayce asked. He continued before she had a chance to answer. "The Sabbat know only two things â€" violence and power. One is their means of achieving the other. Yes, they'll probably go after Julian first."

"Oh my God, we have to get him out of here!" Sasha said, starting to panic. Sasha was starting to border on hysteria within only a moment's notice.

"It's not as if he doesn't know, Sasha," Rayce replied. "Julian knows what they will do, and he stays in defiance of them." He waited a few moments before continuing. "Just remember what I said and go to Cash. He's the only one who will take good enough care of you."

Cash stood outside the room in disbelief as it dawned on him that Rayce had been serious the whole time. Cash suddenly had to reevaluate his view of this Brujah, who seemed so different and yet in some ways so similar to every other Brujah he had ever known.

"Why can't you watch over me?" Sasha asked, a hurt look on her face.

"I'll be busy," Rayce answered coolly. Yes, he thought, very busy. He would have to make sure that Cameron died in the ensuing conflict, so that he could make his own bid for power within the clan. "You promise me you'll stay at Cash's side?"

"Yeah," Sasha replied reluctantly. "I promise."

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VIII

**

Johnny sat outside the Steps of Rome coffeehouse, enjoying the cup of coffee he had just made for himself. True, the coffeehouse was closed at five in the morning, but that hadn't deterred him. He had simply gone in and brewed a cup of coffee for himself. Yashida knew that he would not be hassled by any police. He had many ways of dealing with them.

Yashida looked up at the sky, the slightly perceptible streaks of light beginning to show. The sun would be up within a half-hour, he knew, and he would have to go inside. Years ago, just being out this close to dawn would have started to put him in a panic, but he had grown more and more accustomed to the gray of the approaching day, deriving a somewhat morbid fascination with the rising sun which could turn him to ash.

As he sat there, listening to the birds beginning to sing, a black BMW pulled up next to the curb in front of him. He watched as Heinrich Schacter stepped out of the vehicle and approached him. "State your name and clan," the well dressed man demanded.

"Yashida, Telemon," Johnny answered with a smile. He loved saying the name of his clan. The fact that no one had ever heard of Clan Telemon made him feel as if he were a man of mystery, an enigma in a world full of people who despised unanswered questions. "So who the hell are you?" he asked, impressed with the fine clothes that the man wore. He wondered for a moment how much money the man had in his wallet, but decided against finding out. The man looked a little formidable.

"My name is Henry Schacter, and I demand some answers." Schacter hovered over the smaller kindred.

"Well pull up a chair and let's talk," Johnny suggested. "You better make it quick, though, the sun's coming up." Schacter piqued the interest of Yashida, and the Telemon decided that he wanted to find out as much as he could about this unknown entity.

"Yes, I noticed," Schacter replied evenly as he glanced up at the sky. He sat down and continued. "Do you know Rayce?"

"Sure," Johnny replied. "I guess you want to know something about a piece of information that Rayce has been hiding," Yashida suggested. The only reason the Telemon could think of for people to be asking about Rayce was that they had figured out that while the Sabbath was nowhere near San Francisco, an angry pack of garou was. Despite his calm performance, Johnny was becoming more and more nervous. This man was rather unsettling, he decided. The sun rising behind Henry's back wasn't helping matters any, either. The situation was certainly starting to quickly become uncomfortable.

"Where are the garou?" Schacter asked. He watched for any reaction in the small man sitting across from him, but saw none.

"What makes you think I know?" Johnny answered, finishing up his coffee.

"You seem to know about the lupines being in the city, that's a good start," Schacter replied.

"Knowing they're in the city and knowing where they are at every moment are two completely different things," Yashida answered, pointing out the obvious. As he spoke, Johnny wiped out the inside of the mug, and then placed it in one of his pockets.

"I find it unlikely that you would be sitting out in the open unless you knew exactly where the garou were," Schacter replied. "You don't strike me as being stupid."

"The garou don't scare me at all," Johnny stated, a small tinge of arrogance in his voice.

"Oh really?" Heinrich asked. "You must be the only vampire in the city that isn't afraid of them." Schacter looked the lone vampire up and down before continuing. "Perhaps you are not as intelligent as I thought."

"Don't get me wrong, I know there's not a snowball's chance in hell of me fighting off even a single one of them," Johnny conceded. "I can outrun them, though, and that's even better as far as I'm concerned."

Schacter smiled as he looked at Yashida. He realized him to be the perfect acquaintance. He was unwilling to fight anyone head on, but was more than willing to try to manipulate things from behind the scenes. Heinrich pondered whether he'd actually have to bother dominating the will of this particular kindred. After all, a willing ally was always so much more effective. "Tell me, Yashida, where are the lupines?" Schacter asked again. "The sun is coming up, and this banter can't continue much longer. I really need to know."

"Why?" Johnny asked.

"There are a bunch of kindred from LA coming into town tomorrow night," Heinrich said, giving Johnny a free piece of information. He hoped that his newest acquaintance would see the gift for what it was, and reciprocate. "I would like to have the garou eliminate these kindred before they become a threat to my plans."

"And what are your plans?" Johnny asked, moving closer.

"To destroy the Ventrue prince of this city," Schacter replied matter-of-factly. "You see, I don't particularly like the Ventrue clan. They cause problems with my own business interests." Johnny saw that Heinrich was holding something back, but he did not care much what it was. He was willing to act as if he believed the man sitting before him.

"Yeah, they have a habit of being like that," Johnny agreed. He grinned as he spoke, but his eyes kept looking up the sky, now beginning to brighten more quickly. He desperately wanted to put off telling this man where the garou were until the next night, when they could continue their conversation without the threat of being disintegrated by sunlight, but at the same time he wanted the question of Schacter resolved now. Well, Johnny thought to himself, I never was the most patient person in the world. "What's in it for me if I tell you where they are?" the Telemon asked, always looking to better his position.

"What do you want?" Schacter asked, now curious about the possible motivations of Yashida.

"Simply a phone number where I can reach you in the future, in case I need a favor or two," Johnny replied. "Maybe a little information comes your way every now and then." Johnny withdrew the sunglasses he had in his pocket and put them on, knowing that limiting the growing light around him would help settle his nerves a bit. The sun was still far from being over the horizon, though the sky was noticeably gray.

"Fine." Schacter produced a business card from his pocket, and wrote a number on the back. "If you need to reach me, call the number that I wrote, not the one printed on the card," he instructed. "This is my direct number."

"Thanks," Johnny replied as he took the card. "The garou are in the Lombard Plaza Motel. I don't know which room, but they can't be too hard to find."

"Certainly not," Schacter agreed.

"I think its time to get going," Johnny said with a nervous grin. "Gotta get some sleep and all with the sun coming up."

"Definitely," Schacter agreed, also casting a quick glance at the sky.

Both men got up, Schacter getting into his vehicle, peeling out down the street. Johnny hopped on his bike and revved the engine as far as it would go. It would only take a few minutes to get to his place in Chinatown, as he was now in the neighboring section of North Beach. However, Johnny still rode like a man possessed, not taking any chances that he wouldn't be in before the sun came up. It had, after all, been years since he could consider the deadly light of day to be something nice to see in the morning.

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I

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Mark Larsson looked out the window of the Lombard Plaza Motel, waiting for the sun to finally drop completely below the horizon. Kristen came up behind him and gazed out the window just as intently. "So do we go back out there tonight?" she asked eagerly. "James and Looks Within seem ready to go."

"They're not completely healed yet," Mark answered. While the large Get of Fenris warrior was more than willing to go into battle and die in opposing what he viewed as the forces of darkness, he would not rush into combat before his people were ready. The kindred of the city would be ready for his pack's next attack. They would meet far stronger resistance than they had the first night they had assaulted Julian Luna's mansion.

"They're strong enough," Kristen returned, trying to persuade Mark to stop delaying her quest for vengeance. "Besides, every day we wait gives our enemy more opportunity to get better prepared."

"It's already too late to worry about them becoming more prepared," Andrew answered as he walked up. "The best thing to do would be to leave the city and come back in a few months. By then any alliances they would have made to meet our threat will have broken down as a result of the infighting that defines vampire existence. Their new progeny won't be ready to offer resistance yet, so the time will be better."

"No," Kristen hissed. "They will pay for their crimes against my tribe now. There will be no waiting."

"What the white man says makes sense," Looks Within chimed in. "Trust a Shadow Lord to know how to break down an enemy's alliances." Though the compliment had also served as an insult, Andrew did not seem to catch the negative implications.

"Thank you, Looks Within," Andrew answered, apparently proud for having been recognized as an excellent schemer.

"That was not a compliment, foolish student of the Euro-wyrm," Looks Within retorted. "Still, I follow the decisions of our alpha. What do you think, Mark?" Deep inside, Looks Within also hoped that they would enter battle. He had a particular distaste of vampires, a scourge that had not existed in the America's before European discovery of the continent.

Mark stood a moment in silence. It was true that the kindred would probably become more careless over time, but he knew garou politics far too well. Once they left the city, their elders would find another task for them to complete, and they would never get back to this mission. Besides, he was Get, and he would never allow the destruction of agents of the worm to go unfinished. "We stay," he answered, the finality in his voice making it obvious that there would be no discussion. "There is no glory in fleeing from this conflict. We will tear out the hearts of our enemies and sing praises to Gaia. It is our responsibility as her defenders."

Andrew and Looks Within nodded in reaction to his decree, and Kristen beamed with pleasure at the thought that her family would have vengeance. James still appeared to be asleep, taking up the entire surface of the bed with his crinos form. Natasha, hunched over in a corner, appeared indifferent to the entire conversation. That was not unusual, though. She had never taken part in the decision-making sessions of the pack. She could be considered the omega of the pack, the lowest garou in the packing order. She knew her place and never seemed to question it.

"Alright," Mark began, "as long as we're in this god-forsaken city, we might as well look around. We might even find a stray leech to..." A knock at the door cut him off. Mark looked around the room quickly, giving orders to his packmates with little more than a nod or a flash of a hand signal.

Even as Mark slowly opened the door, James had found his way into the small bathroom, Kristen had drawn a gun and stood behind the half-open door, and Natasha, Looks Within, and Andrew all sat on the bed with a deck of cards, pretending to be in the middle of a hand of poker. Mark looked at them quickly with satisfaction, pleased with their ability to prepare with only a moment's notice.

In the doorway Mark faced Heinrich Schacter, who was once again decked out completely in black. "Good evening," he said congenially. "I would like to speak to you and your friends for a few moments, if you please."

Mark looked him over head to toe, weighing any possible threat the man could present against his pack's ability to rip his limbs off. It didn't take long to decide that though Heinrich was large by human standards, he would be absolutely no match for just one member of his pack, let alone the whole group. "Come on in," he answered, "but if you're here to introduce us to some new-fangled religion, I have to tell you that we're all devout in our beliefs already."

"I'd rather stay out here, if you do not mind," Schacter answered. Although Heinrich knew little about the lupines, he did know that they were unwilling to ever reveal their true nature in the open, and while he may be able to hold off one or two of them, an entire pack in a confined space would certainly spell his doom.

"Suit yourself," Mark answered. "What do you want to talk about stranger? Make it quick, though, we want to go out and get something to eat."

Unlike many of the other people that Schacter had spoken to within the last few days, this garou seemed completely unintimidated by his presence. As he thought about it, Heinrich began to realize that it was indeed he who was becoming anxious. He shook it off as quickly as he could, though, deciding it was simply a result of him not knowing much about these possible foes.

"So what do you want to talk about?" Mark repeated, noticing Schacter's hesitation. Heinrich cursed himself for being so obviously preoccupied. Had this been a room full of vampires he would have been completely unperturbed.

"I simply wish to discuss your relationship with Julian Luna,"

Schacter said, getting right to the point.

At the mention of the word, Andrew and Natasha both drew Mac-10's, leveling them at Heinrich through the doorway. Mark reflexively punched Schacter in the gut, doubling him over. A moment later, Mark's legs seemed to fail him, and he collapsed to the ground. Schacter regained his senses, and started to turn to run away, only to have his leg grabbed in the jaws of a wolf, which began to pull him strongly into the room. Heinrich, realizing the inevitability of his situation, raised his arms over his head. "I surrender," he yelled, his voice on the verge of panic. "I only came to talk. I beg you to simply hear me out."

As he was pulled into the room, sitting up as Looks Within dragged him across the threshold, he was kicked down to the floor by Kristen, who hovered over him with a dagger at his throat. Andrew and Natasha pulled Mark in behind Schacter.

"What the hell happened to you?" Andrew asked Mark calmly.

"I don't know," he responded frantically. "My legsâ€¦ I can't feel my legs!"

"What the hell did you do to him?" Kristen yelled at Schacter.

"Nothingâ€¦ really," he answered. Schacter looked around him, realizing just how bad an idea this had been. "His legs will be fine, he just pinched a nerve when he moved to hit me so quickly. I've seen it before."

"You did this to me!" Mark yelled at Heinrich. "I'm going to rip your leg off and beat you to death with it." As he spoke his words became less intelligible, his body increasing in size until he was over nine feet of heavily muscled werewolf, seething in fury at the disability that took from him his ability to fight in the name of Gaia.

"Please, Mark," Andrew said. "Let's at least find out who he is. If he knew where to find us, Luna might not be far behind."

"This is not open for discussion," Kristen answered him. "I think our alpha has made it clear that this interloper is to die." A murderous glow had appeared in Kristen's eyes, and anyone who did not know her might have gotten the impression that perhaps she enjoyed too much the thought of killing.

"I outrank you, fostern" Andrew said, reminding Kristen that in the eyes of the garou she was still an adolescent. "If you wish to challenge me, you may do so. Otherwise, stand down or be held in breach of the Litany. I will stand as your judge, and trust me when I say your punishment will be severe."

The reminder of Kristen's lower status in garou society convinced her to back off, though she did so with obvious reluctance. With Andrew so intent on having his way, everyone else also backed down. James came out of the bathroom and dragged Mark in with him, keeping him out of reach of their visitor.

"Now that that is all settled, we shall speak like civilized people,"

Andrew said calmly. He glared at each of his packmates one last time, just to make certain that they all understood that he would brook no disagreement to his decision. Not that it mattered, he thought. Only Mark and Natasha were of his rank. Mark was indisposed, and Natasha feared positions of authority, and would not challenge. True, Looks Within was actually of higher rank, and could have ended his interrogation then and there, but he knew the Uktena would take the wisest course of action, which was to identify this man, his motives, and contacts.

"My name is Andrew Thelopolis," the garou judge said to Schacter as he extended his hand.

"Heinrich Schacter," Henry replied in his thick accent, shaking hands with his garou interrogator.

"What brings you here, Mr. Schacter?" Andrew asked, drawing what appeared to be a long dagger made out of black glass.

"I had hoped to come to terms with you on an alliance, of sorts," Schacter replied hopefully, beginning to calm down. Although he was certain he would almost surely die before leaving this motel room, he was formulating plans to make his death as difficult a task for the garou to achieve as he possibly could.

"What sort of an alliance did you have in mind?" Andrew asked. His statement was followed by a bellow of rage emanating from the bathroom, followed shortly by the sound of shattering porcelain. Thelopolis could imagine the rage that Mark was feeling if he could hear the conversation. Mark would never have approved of his authority being usurped. However, that was a problem Andrew knew he could deal with at a later time.

"There are more kindred coming into town tonightâ€¦ help sent by the prince of LA," Schacter said. "Everyone thinks the Sabbat is behind the attacks. They have no idea a pack of garou is responsible for all the deaths."

"Obviously not everyone thinks it's the Sabbat," Andrew replied with a thin smile. "You knew we were here. How did you find us?"

"There are a couple of kindred who apparently found out about you," Heinrich said, feeling no impulse to hold back the truth from the garou. He knew that if they suspected him of deceit, he would probably die instantly. "They're keeping it a secret, knowing you'd be more effective if the kindred don't know enough to load silver shells into their weapons."

"Well that was mighty thoughtful of them," Andrew said with a smile. He found it amusing that kindred worked to get each other killed in battle. It was no wonder the garou had always found the vampires to be considerably weaker than they themselves were.

"One of them's been following you around, just to see what you've been up to," Heinrich added, referring to Yashida, knowing that the Telemon would probably not be able to continue his surveillance if the garou knew about him. Not that it mattered, Schacter thought. He would be able to control all of the garou's actions from this point on, he figured.

"Oh really," Andrew responded, surprised that none of his pack had detected the spy. Andrew closed his fingers around the hilt of his dagger, his face becoming creased with thought.

"State your terms, Mr. Schacter," Andrew said after a few moment's thought.

"You have no authority to make a deal with this man," Kristen snarled. "Only Mark can make this call."

"Quiet, whelp!" Andrew shot back. "The terms, Mr. Schacter," he repeated to their visitor.

"I'll set them up, divert them somehow to a place of your choosing," Schacter said. "I would recommend somewhere in the Mission District. You can jump them, and I'll help put you back together. I have limited ability for healing. In fact, as a show of good faith, I will heal your alpha before I go, and the other one in there with him. He still appears to have a claw wound on his chest."

"What time would this attack take place?" Andrew asked, knowing the pack would need time to feed and to prepare mentally before a major assault.

"I'll call and tell you after I set it up," Schacter answered evenly. "That way you can all discuss this, or whatever it is you do to make your decisions. We can finalize the deal then." Schacter now started to feel much better about his fate. He hadn't expected to find a garou who was so levelheaded and calculating. He had always heard of them being mad, ravening monsters. He counted his lucky stars that the one member of the pack that seemed to fit that description was lying on the floor of the bathroom, tearing the porcelain off the walls.

"I accept your terms," Andrew said, "with the condition that our alpha must approve my decision. Do your healing, and call us later." Andrew resheathed his dagger to emphasize that the conversation had ended.

Within five minutes Schacter had done all he could to heal his new allies. Mark was walking again, and James' wound was all but completely mended. Looks Within was in perfect health.

As he walked out into the night, happy to be leaving the room alive, Heinrich thanked the fates that everything had gone so well. He had never really expected them to accept his offer. Now he had to figure out how to divert the approaching kindred, so he could make good on his end of the bargain. It probably would not be wise to make a pack of garou think he had deceived them.

Behind him, in the motel room, a debate was beginning between the garou. Mark looked over the members of his pack, trying to decide how each of them probably felt about the deal that had been offered to them. He decided to start the discussion with Andrew, who he felt had greatly exceeded his authority.

"Andrew, do you wish to challenge for alpha?" he asked, grinning widely. Mark knew that if Andrew challenged, he would do it knowing that Mark would have the right to decide the method of the challenge. It would, of course, be combat, and Andrew stood no chance in combat

with the larger Get of Fenris ahroun.

"Of course not, I follow your lead, as I have always done," Andrew replied smoothly. He stood looking at his leader, seemingly unaware that he had transcended his authority in any way.

He knows, Mark thought. He knows that he went too far, and that I need to show him, once and for all, what his place is in the pack. "You had no authority to make a deal with our little visitor."

"I did not make a deal," Andrew replied, fighting back the smirk that he almost portrayed. "I simply listened to his proposal and instructed him to contact us later to hear our decision. That is to say," Andrew added, correcting himself, "find out about your decision." Andrew simply stood looking at Mark.

"He did it right, Mark," Kristen offered, admitting that she had also been wrong in being in such a rush to murder their visitor. "If we had simply killed Schacter we would never have known about these new kindred, at least not until we hit the mansion and got cut to pieces."

"We will not be cut to pieces," Mark almost shouted. "They are wyrmspawn, and are weaker than us." He stood arrogantly, with his chest out and chin held high.

"They would have defeated us if we had shown up expecting half as many vampires as there actually will be," Kristen answered uncomfortably. She sat down as she spoke, hoping the truth would sink in to her alpha's head, though she knew he never would outwardly admit that they could be defeated.

"The fact remains," Andrew began, "that an offer has been made. Assuming Mr. Schacter can uphold his end of the bargain, we must decide whether or not we should accept."

"What do you think, Looks Within?" Mark asked, looking to the oldest member of the pack. They all knew that this meant Mark was unable to decide for himself. Too many factors needed to be weighed, and when definite action was not an option, Mark was generally lost.

"Do not trust the man," Looks Within replied. "The spirits fear him, and thus so do I. I think we all should. He could mean the end of the pack." There was a tinge of fear in Looks Within's voice that Mark had never heard before. He had always known the shaman to be the epitome of courage, never even giving a thought to the harm that could befall him. The pack's alpha was suddenly nervous.

"What?" Mark asked. "That pathetic excuse for whatever it is he's supposed to be?"

"My totem has told me this, and I have never known the owl to be wrong," Looks Within replied. "He brings wisdom to those who listen to his words." Looks Within closed his eyes and began to mumble in a language that was unintelligible to the rest of them, and all knew he would have no further participation in this conversation. The only beings that would understand their shaman were the spirits that he claimed were all around them.

"Let's hit the mansion now," Natasha said, uncomfortable with voicing

an opinion.

"What?" Mark asked, surprised at the fact that the Silver Fang had even offered a suggestion as to what action they should take.

"The help from LA is not there yet," Natasha pointed out. "If we hit them now, we can finish the leeches before they get any aid. Our problem of reinforcements will be solved." Natasha sat back, watching for reactions from her packmates. They all seemed to be tossing the idea around in their minds. She saw their reaction, and knew that her suggestion had value. She felt a slight euphoria in knowing that she had been taken seriously. For a brief moment she felt the desire to continue asserting herself, to perhaps increase her status in the pack. It was then that her fear grabbed her again. She became terrified of what would happen if she took responsibility and made a mistake. She could not accept the possibility, and began to withdraw back into her shell.

"It's too risky," Andrew finally said. He felt he should discredit this idea immediately, knowing Mark would quickly latch on to this strategy, as it presented the most available path to battle. "Remember, we don't know when these reinforcements are due to arrive. If they show up in the middle of our battle, attacking us from the rear, we will suffer major losses, even if we do somehow win the day. I wish the idea could work, but there are too many unknown variables."

"If we strike quickly, it could work," Mark said, his reaction showing Andrew that he had not spoken quickly enough. Their alpha had not been dissuaded. "You just fear the very thing that could bring us greatest glory."

"No, Mark," Kristen said. "Andrew is right. A dozen heavily armed kindred attacking from the rear when we've already taken some injuries is too much. We'd never make it out. I think we should wait for Schacter. If we find out we have a little bit of time before the LA kindred get here, then we'll attack the mansion. Otherwise, we can't risk it."

"If we find out we have some time, though, we attack!" Mark shouted. "There will be blood tonight, one way or the other. The enemies of Gaia will be punished." All but Andrew nodded in agreement.

"However," Andrew added, "if we find that no clear opportunity will present itself, we hit the other kindred, and leave the mansion alone."

"Yes," Mark agreed. "Like I said, there will be blood. Whose blood it will be is the only question."

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II

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Caitlin sat in her office, watching the second hand slowly make its way across the face of the clock. It was eight thirty, and Frank Kohaneck was supposed to be meeting her at that very moment. Almost

on cue, Frank walked into the newsroom, passed a few of her reporters who stayed late to make deadline, and strode up to her office door. She waved him in, barely able to conceal the excitement she was feeling.

"Thanks for coming down here, Frank," she said with a broad smile. Caitlin had rarely gotten along with Frank, feeling that he had some unspoken grudge against her boss, Julian Luna. However, it was because of Frank's constant attention to Julian's affairs that had led to Caitlin asking the San Francisco inspector to visit her office.

"What exactly is it you want, Caitlin," Frank asked asked, taking a seat in the chair in front of her desk. He had found her desire to meet with him as strange as she had, and was intrigued to hear what she had to say.

"What's happening with Julian?" Caitlin asked, the concern obvious in her voice. "I can't get in touch with him, he doesn't come out, and I know for a fact that his mansion was attacked the other night."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Caitlin," Frank answered, his tone clearly indicating that he knew a lot about the situation, but was unwilling to divulge more. Or is it that he's unable to say anything else, Caitlin wondered. From what Caitlin had gathered about Julian's influence in the city, it was not out of line to think he could pull strings to keep even the police silent.

"Come on, Frank, off the record," Caitlin pleaded. "I just want to know to satisfy my own curiosity. This doesn't go in the paper." The way she looked at him helped to lower some of Frank's defenses.

"Off the record?" Frank asked, instinctually distrusting the reporter sitting in front of him. Caitlin nodded in response. "Ok, there was an attack the other night, and Julian lost virtually all of his guards," Frank said, hardly believing he was giving out the information. "No one on the force knows who did it, but Julian has a good idea. He's got all his friends up there with him, waiting for these people to try again. That's about all I know."

Caitlin seemed to ponder what he said for a couple of minutes, and then continued. "Have you ever heard of Heinrich Schacter?" she asked, continuing to dig for information on the visitor she was certain that she had had the night before.

"No," Frank answered immediately, not even needing time to think about it. "Never met anyone named Heinrich, I think I'd probably remember."

"Well, he was in my office last night," Caitlin said. "At first I thought I had dreamt the whole thing, but I found a few articles on him. He's some kind of big shot mathematician in Germany, a chaos theory expert. He was asking about Julian."

"What did you tell him?" Frank asked curiously.

"Not much," Caitlin answered. "Still, though, I think he got more out of me than I wanted to say. He was a little creepy. I just wanted to know if you had heard about him. I guess something about him made me think that he belonged hanging around people like you and

Julian."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frank asked, half-laughing. Indeed, he found the comment only half-funny. Sometimes, he mused, Caitlin seemed so close to grasping the truth about her boss. It was only a matter of time before Caitlin would figure out what was going on, or before someone figured she had gotten too close and needed to be dealt with.

"You know," Caitlin replied with a slight smile, "up all night, sleep all day, get involved in stuff that's weird enough to be the running plotline of some Fox television series." Caitlin shook her head, as if to clear her thoughts.

"What are you busy with right now Ms. Byrne?" Frank asked, looking to change the topic. He wanted to get her thinking about something else, starting to fear a little for her safety. He saw Caitlin as being like a deer that wandered into a predator's territory because it simply did not know any better.

"Oh, now I'm Ms. Byrne?" Caitlin asked with a smile, catching Frank's change of tone.

"Well, I was going to ask if you wanted to get some coffee or something," Frank said. "When I'm asking out the girlfriend of Julian Luna, you are Ms. Byrne," Frank added with a wide grin.

"Coffee would be great," Caitlin said, standing up and grabbing her purse.

As the two of them walked out, Frank allowed himself a sigh of relief. He had feared that Caitlin might try to go to Julian Luna's mansion, and the inspector feared that if she did so, she might be caught in the crossfire of the attack that he felt was inevitable. Frank knew that Julian did not seem to take any great precautions in protecting Caitlin from his life, so Frank took the responsibility upon himself. After all, he thought, my purpose is to serve and protect.

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III

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Johnny Yashida sat in the House of Nanking, talking on his cell-phone as he hungrily tore into the chicken that was widely considered the best in San Francisco. Across from him sat a large man with close-cropped blonde hair. Johnny's friend seemed to have a military air about him, but despite his intense demeanor he stared in wonder at some of the people coming in and out. Although there was a large crowd within the restaurant, the two kindred were being given a wide berth. It seemed as if everyone knew on an instinctual level that they were in the presence of predators.

"Well yeah, that's why I called," Johnny said into the phone. On the other end there was silence as Schacter considered the words of his newest co-conspirator.

"What makes you think I can't find out some other way when the

kindred will be arriving?" Schacter inquired in response.

"What makes you think you have time to use your other informants?" Johnny answered. "Either give me what I want, or try to beat the clock, it's your choice. If you think about it, my price is not all that high, and it's conditional. How can you lose?"

"Very well, I accept your terms," Schacter said after a few moments. Heinrich hated feeling as if he was being bent over a barrel, but Johnny was right. He had little choice in the matter.

"Good," Johnny replied, satisfied that he would be getting an item he had wanted for quite awhile. "Now, you're going to set up these kindred with the garou, right?" Yashida asked, verifying Schacter's plans.

"That's the plan." Schacter replied.

"Call me and let me know exactly what's going on, ok?" Johnny asked. "I have a few pawns of my own that I want to move around." Johnny smiled as he spoke, pointing to the man across from him, who also began to smile.

"I'll let you know," Schacter answered.

"Great. They're coming in on 101, and should make it to Luna's at about three," Johnny offered.

"Thank you," Schacter replied in an irritated voice.

Johnny put the phone back in his pocket, smiling, and looked around the restaurant again. "Any sign of him yet?" Yashida asked.

"No, I haven't seen him, but then again I never met the guy, so I don't know who I'm looking for," his companion responded.

After a few moments of searching, Johnny saw Rayce scanning the tables along the wall. They both set eyes on each other at the same time. "There he is," Johnny said.

Rayce pushed through the crowd and joined the two other kindred. "Sorry I'm late," Rayce apologized. "I had to sneak out when Luna wasn't looking."

"Understood," Johnny answered, not needing an explanation. "Rayce, this is Matt Reimer, the most successful of my progeny. I called him last night and had him make a flight into town. I figured we could use him being around," Johnny said, gesturing to his companion sitting across from him. Matt waved a simple hello as he downed some more of the chicken.

"He eats, too?" Rayce asked, incredulous.

"Absolutely," Johnny answered. "Everyone in my clan eats. In fact, we have to eat food as well as drink blood. Not that I mind much, the socializing around the dinner table is something that I think a lot of our kind really miss, though they don't always realize it." He shoved another piece of chicken in his mouth to emphasize the point.

"That's disgusting," was the only response Rayce could muster. Averting his eyes from the eating kindred, he continued. "So exactly how many progeny have you sired?"

"Two that I'll speak of, although one is a fairly reclusive hitman," Johnny replied. "Matt here is a true team player, the epitome of what we look for in our clan. He was lucky we had decided what it was that we wanted in our clan before he came along, or we might have passed him over."

Matt ignored the praise and started to leer at a woman in tight jeans and a halter-top. "As you can see," Johnny continued, watching his child, "he hasn't been dead long enough to forget some of his mortal desires." Rayce only smiled in response. "Forget it, Matt. I think she would qualify as the black jeans crowd."

"The what? What's the black jeans crowd?" Matt asked.

"I'll tell you when I have it figured out myself," Johnny replied. "Thanks for the information on the LA kindred, by the way," Johnny said, turning to Rayce.

"Did you get a hold of your accomplice?" Rayce asked his friend.

"Yup," Johnny answered, smiling at the thought of the item he would get from Schacter.

"And?" Rayce asked, trying to enlighten himself as to what was going on.

In response, Johnny's phone rang. "Maybe I'll know in a second," he said, answering the call. Rayce watched Johnny as he spoke to his anonymous ally, trying to pick out any meaning behind the few words that were spoken. All there were were a few 'yups' and 'uh huhs' spoken every few seconds with a 'thanks' at the end.

"Well?" Rayce asked.

"It's all set up," Johnny answered.

"What is?" Rayce inquired further. All he got was a blank look on Johnny's face in response. It was as if his eyes were being held transfixed, and a worried look was coming over his face. "Johnny?" Rayce asked, as if trying to knock him out of his trance. "Are you ok?"

Matt followed Johnny's gaze across the room, settling at last on two men standing within a small crowd, each eating an egg roll and discussing some unknown matter. "Johnny, is that who I think it is?" Matt asked.

"Let's not stick around to find out," Johnny answered, quickly grabbing one last piece of chicken and taking off through the crowd. Matt and a confused looking Rayce were not far behind.

Once they were outside, Rayce finally got Johnny stopped. "Who the hell was in there?" he asked, never before having seen such a reaction in his friend.

"If it was who I think it was, the Inquisition has sent one of their hunters into town," Johnny answered, a slight sense of doom evident in his voice.

"What?" Rayce asked, now sounding considerably concerned. The word 'Inquisition' had a terrible, personal meaning to Rayce. Too many of his clan's elders had been wiped out by human zealots during that time in history.

"Those two guysâ€¦ one of them I've never seen before, but the other one was holding a glowing spear the last time I saw him, back in Pennsylvania," Johnny explained, hoping that he would not have to elaborate. The memory was not pleasant for him.

"I thought we got the garou to eat those guys," Matt said, recalling the event himself.

"I guess they missed," Johnny replied. The small Telemon got onto his bike, and Matt climbed into a Jeep Wrangler that was parked next to him. "Come on Rayce, we have to hurry," Johnny said. "We only have a little over an hour."

"Why, what's in an hour?" Rayce asked.

"The garou are hitting Luna's at about ten thirty or whatnot," Johnny answered. "If you have any preparations to make, you'd better get on it."

"What?" Rayce asked, still surprised at hearing about the impending garou strike.

"Apparently, the garou have someone in their pack with a brain," Johnny said.

"Just what we need," Matt said as he started his Jeep.

"Yeah, well they figure that it would be better just to whack Luna before he has a chance to get any help," Johnny explained as he kick-started his bike.

"I thought you said they were going to kill these new kindred first," Rayce said.

"I guess they changed their minds," Johnny shouted over the hum of his bike's engine. "It makes sense to do it this way, though. Like I said, someone's thinking."

"Where are you going to be during all this, Johnny?" Rayce asked, hoping his friend could hear him.

"I figure I'll be on the grounds somewhere," Yashida said as he put on his helmet. "I wouldn't miss this for the world. Well, maybe for the world, but not much else." Johnny grinned.

"I was wondering if you could watch over someone for me," Rayce shouted as Johnny began to roll away.

"I doubt it," Johnny yelled back. "Who'd you have in mind?"

"Sasha, Julian's niece," Rayce called out. The motorcycle stopped

immediately, and Rayce could see that Johnny was thinking.

Johnny thought about the possibilities that could present themselves if Julian were to survive this night. He may actually have an opportunity to save the life of the prince's niece. An opportunity like this was too good to pass up. At the same time, though, he had to remember that he would be protecting her from garou. What good is the thankfulness of a prince if you're not alive to enjoy it, Johnny wondered. "Alright," he answered. "If I see her, and she's in trouble, I'll help her out as best I can."

"I have your word on it?" Rayce questioned.

"Would you take my word even if I gave it?" Johnny returned.

"There's honor among thieves, Johnny," Rayce yelled. "Don't forget it."

Johnny didn't respond as he quickly took off down the street. He and Matt didn't have much time to get their stuff together and get in position. He had to wonder how they got into these situations.

Back in the House of Nanking, Brother Venturi and Father Boland talked quickly. "What exactly is the situation?" Boland asked.

"Apparently, there is a kindred war developing," Venturi replied. "The house of the prince was attacked a few days ago, and the survivors have been holed up in there ever since. Not much else seems to have happened."

"How many people do you have here?" Boland asked, hoping that there were a number of followers significant enough to have an impact in the conflict.

"Including myself, there are five of us in the city," Venturi said, himself not sounding impressed. "With you there are six."

"That's not bad," Boland replied. Though it did not seem like half a dozen hunters was many, he had not worked with such a large group in over twenty years. To Peter Boland, the odds seemed good. "Are they experienced?" the priest asked.

"Two of my men are hunters, each with at least two kills," Venturi answered. "Brother Dugan has been in battle once, though he did not extinguish his target. Father Nevin is, unfortunately, completely inexperienced. He is rather fit, though. He coaches wrestling in his spare time."

"Alright," Boland said, considering the situation. "I think we should go up and stake out the mansion, no pun intended."

"Agreed," Brother Venturi replied.

"Then let's get going, the sooner the better," Venturi said. "We don't want to miss anything just because we were having dinner."

At that the two men quickly finished their food and rushed out the door, unaware that they were about to walk right into the middle of a

battle that pitted against each other forces which had despised each other for millennia.

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IV

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Mark led his packmates into Lincoln Park, looking at the scenery around him. It was amazing how far from the city one could feel once within the confines of a small wooded area. Still, the odor of the city could be detected, but it was far from being the overpowering stench that it was back out on the streets.

"How much farther?" Mark questioned Kristen. She was the one who had led them out here, toward the caern of her Glass Walker family. This particular holy place was said to help increase the stamina of those who held their moots there. These gatherings of the garou helped connect them to their traditions and history, and were generally an event consisting of much formality. For this short pack moot however, there would be little more than the statement of their goals and a short period of meditation to focus their wills. Still, the pack would become closer as a result, and it was this closeness that gave them an edge over the superior numbers of their opponents. Each of the kindred would fight as a single entity, hoping to not only help carry the day, but also, more importantly, to save his own skin. The garou fought differently, as a single unit. Glory would come equally to all members of the pack as a result of their victory, so there was no reason for being a glory hound.

Kristen walked on, ignoring Mark's question. Looks Within spoke up, however. "It is not far, the spirits are of the wyld are in this area, a small community in a sea of weaver spirits." Mark reflected on Looks Within's words "so simple, yet containing so rich a meaning. Their mysticism included three godheads "the Wyrms, the Weaver, and the Wyld. It was from the Wyld that raw creation sprung, and the Weaver then gave this creation shape and substance. The Wyrms did the essential task of destroying what was left over.

Tragically, both the Weaver and the Wyrms had gone mad. The Weaver, through its spirits, now strove to fashion everything into an increasingly intricate form. The modern cities that were scars upon the face of Gaia were the result. The Wyrms, in its own insanity, sought to destroy everything. It was the belief of the garou that the kindred they now prepared to do battle with were minions of the Wyrms. How could it be otherwise? They were, after all, exceptions to the laws of nature. They never died a natural death, and were therefore leading an existence outside of the cycle of nature. The kindred, as far as the werewolves were concerned, produced nothing and simply aided in rotting the core of civilization. Some tribes even felt enmity toward the kindred because of the fact that they were the destroyers of humanity, as a human died every time that a kindred was born. These garou felt a responsibility toward the humans that they shared the earth with, feeling that all were children of Gaia.

Reaching a clearing, Kristen finally spoke. "We are here."

"Close the circle," Looks Within said hurriedly. As he was their

theurge, or shaman, he would be the one to lead them in the rituals of the moot.

They spoke of the murdered children, and many other crimes committed by the vampires within the city. They spoke of their responsibility to defend Gaia, their earth-mother, from the rape of the Wyrms. They roused themselves into a blood lust, and then suddenly plunged their psyches into meditation. It would have done no good to let their feelings loose then, as the enemy was across the city from them. Instead, they bottled their rage up within them, knowing it would be there to release against their foes when the time was right. After a little while, they stood up in unison, and silently began to stride out of the park.

When they left, they all walked with longer steps, with confidence and purpose. Within each head was the yearning for the coming battle, the all-consuming desire to rip their enemies apart.

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Johnny and Matt both pulled up near Luna's mansion, being greeted almost immediately by two Gangrel with uzis. "Who the hell are you?" one of the Gangrel asked the two newcomers.

"Yashida, of clan Telemon," Johnny answered formally. "This is my childe. I presented myself to the prince a couple of days ago. I simply wish the protection he has offered all of the kindred loyal to him within the city."

"Alright," the same Gangrel answered. He motioned for the other to open the gate, and the two Telemon drove onto the grounds, pulling right up to the front of the building. Three more Gangrel were standing guard outside the front door, along with two Brujah. The sight of these Brujah and Gangrel working together struck Johnny as being so odd he wished he had a camera.

Johnny got off of his bike, and went to the back of Matt's jeep, pulling out a leather overnight bag. Matt joined him a moment later, pulling out a duffel bag large enough to hold a German Shepherd. They walked up to the door and were stopped by the guards, enforcing another level of security.

"What do you two have in the bags?" one of the Brujah asked.

"Weapons, of course," Johnny answered sarcastically, rolling his eyes. "We are expecting to be attacked, aren't we?"

"We have to check them for you," one of the Gangrel piped in. "The prince doesn't want any overly destructive weapons in his home."

"Such as?" Matt asked.

"Explosives are the main concern," the Brujah answered.

"So this would be acceptable?" Matt continued, opening the bag enough to expose a Barret 82A1 .50 Cal sniper rifle, sitting next to an HK MP5, a Street Sweeper automatic shotgun, two Glock 10 mm's, and several magazines of rounds. The five guards just looked at the weapons, practically drooling with envy.

"That all looks ok," the Brujah answered.

"Then we'll be going on in," Johnny said as he walked past them into the foyer. They were almost immediately greeted by Rayce.

"Nice of you guys to show up," he commented with a quick glance at his watch. The Telemon were cutting things closer than he would have liked.

"We need a private room where we can get our stuff together," Johnny replied, ignoring any pleasantries. He glanced around, seeing a couple of kindred already noticing their arrival. "Now!"

Rayce, seeing Johnny's obvious urgency, led them off down a hallway and gestured them into one of the guest bedrooms. "Sasha happens to have the room across from you," he said, reminding Johnny of his promise to watch over the prince's niece.

"I'm not here to protect Sasha," Johnny said, seemingly ignoring his earlier promise. "I'm simply here to keep an eye on my childe."

"And what are you here for?" Rayce asked Matt, who was already unloading his bag.

Matt initially ignored the question, pulling a black beret out of the bag and putting it on. "I'm here to keep my skills fresh," he finally answered. "A soldier will lose his mettle and become complacent with peace if he lives in contentment too long. Besides, I never fought an enemy like the one coming after us. A whole pack, that is." He pulled out the Barret and looked it over, then went about loading all of his weapons.

Johnny pulled a bandoleer with grenades attached out of his bag, and then pulled out a couple of mines, followed by three bricks of C-4 and the attendant detonators. "What the hell are you doing with all that?" Rayce asked in shock.

"What do you think?" Johnny answered. "We're going into battle, and battle is what clan Telemon is best at. We don't do this half-ass."

"How did you get that stuff in here?" Rayce asked in shock, remembering the guards at the entrance. "They were checking for explosives at the door."

"Well," Johnny began, "as we had thought, the guards became so enraptured over the Barret that they forgot to check my bag. Guess you can't trust Gangrel and Brujah with responsibility. Who would have thought?" As he spoke he pulled an H&K grenade launcher from his bag, handing it to Matt.

"Yeah, who would have thought," Rayce muttered in agreement. "I guess it's about time for me to get ready, myself," he said as he walked

toward the door. "Good luck, guys."

"Yeah, you too," Johnny answered absently. Although he knew that this could very well be the last time he saw his friend, Yashida had more important things to worry about. His own survival figured prominently in his list of duties.

Rayce walked back out of the room, leaving the two to prepare in their own way. Johnny looked over his weapons, hoping they were enough. He had only two .45 Cal automatics with silver bullets, with two extra clips for each. He also had a Beretta 93R 9mm with explosive tips, a 1928A1 Thompson sub-machine gun, a silver-coated ninja-to, four phosphorous grenades, two blocks of C-4, and three knives. In most circumstances, I would feel like a walking arsenal, he thought to himself. Then he looked over at his child, suddenly feeling under-equipped.

Matt had the MP5 over his left shoulder and the Street Sweeper over the right. He carried two Glock 10mm pistols, each with silver rounds, in holsters on his thighs. Strapped to his back was the grenade launcher. The bandoleer was across his chest, displaying the 40mm grenades that were supposedly prohibited in the mansion, and in his hands was the magnificent Barret. Truly, Johnny thought, he is what our clan strives to be. It's no wonder I never seemed to measure up when the chips were down.

"Take this," Matt said, tossing a sub-vocal communicator to his sire. I already set it to the frequency of the mansion's guards. We can listen to what they're doing. Try not to talk at all, unless you really need help."

"Got it," Johnny answered, putting the receiver in his ear. "I'm going outside, I'll watch things from in the trees or something."

"I'll be on the roof," Matt replied.

"Don't get killed," Johnny added as he slowly opened the door, making sure he could slip out without someone seeing him with all of his weapons. "I really don't want to go to the trouble of teaching another child."

"I'll do my best," Matt answered with a smile, immediately going back to work checking over his weapons when Johnny had left.

Julian wandered through his home impatiently, wondering when, if ever, the attack was to come. It had been days since the last assault, and the Brujah were already talking like the massacre was an isolated incident. Some even spoke of leaving the safety of the mansion, as every day away from the streets put their underworld power under more strain. He turned the corner into his study, only to run into Lillie.

"Good evening Lillie," he started, not even acknowledging the fact that he had almost run her down. "What are you up to?"

"Maybe we should go out on the streets, Julian," she said, mirroring the impatience of the Brujah. "We could hunt down our enemies instead of waiting for them to get around to attacking us. This is bad for business."

"That's rather direct," Julian replied. "I didn't expect you to be too willing to run out into battle."

"Do you forget already that I've taken part in clan wars?" Lillie asked, her eyes seeming to almost glow with energy. "I figured you of all people would remember just how ruthless I can be if pressed."

"Fine," Julian said. He did not have the patience or the time to deal with Lillie. "The kindred Cyrus is sending should arrive later this evening," Julian said. "If nothing happens tonight, we'll bring the matter before the primogen, and let them decide whether we should be more assertive in our treatment of this situation."

"Excellent," Lillie said with a sudden smile. "Then I can get back to living my life."

"Assuming you still have one left to live," Julian replied flatly. He walked past her into the library, not even stopping to notice the comfort that the familiarity of the room so often gave to him. He picked his shotgun up off the desk, and placed it in his lap as he sat down. He was ready, he knew that. He didn't know about many of the others, though. Many of the kindred in the city were young, and except for the Brujah, had not seen much battle of any kind.

What if they did win? How would the city look in the aftermath of a major kindred battle? It had been many years since the clan wars, and the weapons they used now were even more destructive. No one, not even the Brujah, had been toting grenade launchers around the city during Archon's war with the Brujah. Maintaining the Masquerade was starting to become so difficult, Julian thought. The police were better equipped now, too. It was not unreasonable to think they may actually be able to apprehend a few of the kindred if the battle spilled from his mansion into the streets. What would the humans do if their prisoner disintegrated when he was brought to the courthouse in the middle of the afternoon for his hearing? Would anyone be able to cover up that great a clue about the existence of vampires? At the very least, it would bring the hunters, and that fact alone would cause enough problems.

"Julian," Cash said urgently as he stepped into the doorway. "The gate guards didn't check in."

"Send out the alarm," Julian replied, slowly getting to his feet. So it began, he thought. Just a few hours before they were to get reinforcements. He had always been so lucky in ruling the city, but now it seemed as though his luck were going to catch up to him.

Julian walked quickly up to Sasha's door, and looked in. "Sasha, stay in your room. No matter what happens," he instructed. Her only response was a puzzled look. Julian then ran downstairs to join the defenders of the mansion. The Brujah, Toreador, Ventrue, and Gangrel were all there in full force. Apparently, Yashida had also shown up with his child. The only Nosferatu, though, was Daedalus. Normally, not even the primogen of the Nosferatu clan would have become involved in the violence that was about to take place, but Daedalus had a particular dislike of the Sabbat. He would stand with the others to prevent the Sabbat from taking over the city that he had

come to call home. The rest of the Nosferatu clan took an apathetic view of the Sabbat. Rumor had it that several of the Nosferatu in the city had at one time been members of the kindred sect that was regarded as the Camarilla's most deadly foe

Rayce ran to the library, once more slipping out the same window he had used previously. He had pondered the question of where to fight the garou " inside or outside. Inside gave him the opportunity of backing into a corner, knowing he wouldn't be attacked from behind. However, he had no desire to be cornered by an angry werewolf. He had decided that the extra space offered outside the mansion was best, despite the possibility it provided of being taken by surprise. Once outside, he looked up at Sasha's window above, checking if he could see her there. The room was dark however, leaving him to hope that she had been smart enough to not come out.

His thoughts were suddenly silenced by the roars of gunfire from the perimeter, followed by screams that ended quite abruptly. The same sound quickly arose from the opposite side of the compound, with the same abrupt end. The battle fodder of the Gangrel and Brujah on the outer edge of their defenses had not lasted long at all. He hoped that they had at least done some damage to the garou. He did have to make it out of here alive to be the prince, after all. Rayce slipped into the shadows and moved to his right, toward the back of the mansion. His hope was that they would once again attack from the sides, as they had before. That would leave the back relatively safe, allowing him to hide until an opportunity to enter the conflict presented itself.

From a tree on the outer edge of the security perimeter, Johnny had seen the garou coming before the guards had. Two wolves, flanking a woman. The three Gangrel below him heard the approach of their attackers, and dropped to the ground, hoping to surprise their prey. They were the most bestial and effective of the kindred in anything that passed for a wooded setting, but tonight they were up against the true masters of the wild. The woman stepped out of the bushes, leveled a HK MP5 at one of the Gangrel, and cut him to pieces as her packmates attacked from the flanks, tearing the limbs from the bodies before proper resistance could be offered. As a final gesture, the bodies were decapitated.

Johnny stayed perfectly still, and called upon some of the abilities he was able to employ with his vampiric blood. While some gained fantastic strength, or the ability to grow claws or turn into a wolf, Yashida was able to affect the lighting around him. Shadows seemed to stretch out from his black outfit, enveloping him in a shroud of darkness. Any sound made by him suddenly fell completely silent, as he used his blood to also cloak the noise of his movements. The garou were completely unaware of his presence, and so continued on. He heard as the remaining garou attacked the other side of the compound, and slowly began to move through the trees, watching the movements and strategies of the lupines. Knowing the enemy, he figured, was the best way to escape death at the hands of their claws.

On the roof, Matt looked through the night vision scope of his weapon, watching as the lupines reached the treeline to the right of Julian's home. There were three of them, each in a different form. One was still in the form of a human woman, and seemed to be armed with some impressive hardware. Another was in the form of a huge wolf, actually more the size of a large pony. The final one was,

predictably enough, in the form of the wolf-man, the shape that the lupines were most typically thought of as being in when entering combat. The guards at the base of Julian's house did not seem aware of their presence.

The three garou scanned the clearing leading to Julian's home, and noticed the half dozen heavily armed kindred waiting for them. "They're ready for us this time," James growled through his impressive jaws. Only another of his kind could even have understood the mishmash of the snarls that constituted a great part of the lupine language, and the semi-words that were the nearest approximation to human speech that he was able to manage.

"Schacter told us that they're expecting to be hit by other vampires," Kristen said. "Maybe you two should take the homid form until we get close, and then change once we're upon them."

"You speak with wisdom," Looks Within answered with a growl, now no longer able to manage human speech at all in his hispo, or dire wolf, form. "I will take my lupis form, though. Vampires can turn into wolves, the kindred will still not suspect anything." With his words he shrunk his shape into that of an ordinary wolf. James joined him in shifting forms, himself becoming human once again. From under the poncho he wore, he withdrew a wide dagger â€" a klaive, the holy weapon of the garou.

"Let's go," he whispered, and ran out into the clearing.

Kristen covered his approach with a spray of gunfire, hitting all of the waiting kindred, knocking them off balance for a brief moment. That was all the time Looks Within needed to close the gap. He was at the neck of one of the guards before the vampire was even able to heal his gunshot wounds. The other five looked in shock at the wolf that was suddenly amongst them, their inexperience in combat showing in their delayed reactions. James was able to use the advantage presented to him. He reached the group and slashed across the throat of one, ducked down, and hamstringed another on the back-swing. The kindred finally regained their senses, and began to fight back violently. Looks Within had moved on, having bitten the head off of his first opponent, and took a shotgun blast right through his ribs. He enlarged his size back into his hispo form and continued the attack, ignoring the pain he was feeling. He pounced upon the surprised Gangrel, who had not been expecting the significant increase in mass of his opponent. Looks Within bit into the man's chest, removing his dead heart from the rest of the body, throwing it against the side of the mansion.

As her packmates fought the healthy kindred, Kristen moved in silently, intent on preventing the two injured vampires from healing their wounds and returning to the fight. She drew her wakizashi, the traditional head-taker sword of the Japanese samurai, and severed the heads from the bodies of her foes, ending any threat they may have presented within only a few more seconds.

James, meanwhile, had been surrounded by two of the four remaining kindred. He was stabbed from behind, but ignored the wound as he focused on the one in front of him with the shotgun. Shifting back into his crinos form, he used the ensuing moment of surprise to lift the armed kindred off of the ground, and proceeded to rip his head from the shoulders. He then turned quickly to deal with the Brujah

who had stabbed him in the back. The lone kindred backed up against the building, the fear evident in his eyes. James removed the look as he thrust the skull from his first victim through the head of the second.

Matt just watched the whole scene from above, wishing to first gauge the strength of his enemy before he attempted to do battle with them. He looked for any sign of weakness in body or tactics, and found nothing obvious. His eyes were then drawn to the side of the large wolf, which was healing itself before his eyes, as effectively as any kindred wound could have been healed. Perhaps even moreso, he thought. Truly, this was a dreadfully powerful foe, as he had always been told, and it seemed, he thought, that gunshots truly only seemed to make them angrier.

From the other side of the house there was yelling, and the intense gunfire indicative of panic-stricken kindred. "Holy shit, garou!" he heard Cash yell out. So, Cash would be the first primogen to fall, Matt thought. How ironic, that the garou should first kill the head of the one clan that has ever been able to coexist, admittedly on a small scale, with the lupines.

Sasha looked from her window, viewing the battle that took place below Matt. She recognized the garou for what they were " the hated enemies of all kindred. She opened her window and crawled out, intent on joining this conflict, on showing her worth in battle to all those that thought she was weak, while at the same time punishing the arrogance of these lupines. On the ledge, she reached back in and grabbed her Ruger Blackhawk, looking forward to the moment she would kill a werewolf with it.

She waited until the garou below her had turned the corner back to the front of the mansion, and then jumped down. When she reached the ground, she circled to the back of the mansion and around to the other side. Once there she saw the advance of Mark, Andrew, and Forgotten Teeth. Panic stricken, Sasha ran back behind the mansion, and slowly began to go back to the front from the right side.

Cash, meanwhile, knew the threat for what it was as soon as the three garou emerged from the treeline, all in the crinos form that made them unmistakable as the stuff kindred nightmares were made of. He opened up with his uzi as he grabbed Julian, pushing him back toward the mansion. Cash watched as his clan mates were ripped to bloody shreds by the garou, many of them so overcome by shock that they were unable to even present any defense to the onslaught. Though he was close to all of these Gangrel, Cash knew he had to protect his prince first, the responsibility depriving him of the chance to die with his clan.

Making it to the front door, Cash ran into Cameron, Daedalus, and Lillie coming out. "Go back in," he screamed. "It's not the Sabbat, it's garou!"

As Cameron turned around to reenter the building which would stand as their last line of defense, he was tackled to the ground by Looks Within, who howled with satisfaction at finding the target of their attack " the man who was behind the deaths of the Gambioni children. Before he could bite down and deprive the Brujah of his blood, however, he was cut into by two pairs of sharp claws which flayed the flesh from upon his bones. He screamed out in pain,

turning to see Daedalus and Julian digging into him. Before Looks Within could even react, James was upon Daedalus, his fangs holding the Nosferatu prone two feet off of the ground while he began to rip him apart with his claws. Looks Within turned on Julian, who was pushed back by Cash, now standing between the two. Looks Within lunged at the Gangrel, knowing it would take mere moments to work his way to the prince. His attack was cut off in mid-flight, however, by a .50 caliber round, sending him four feet off to Cash's left. Matt looked down at the scene, disappointed that he had had to become involved. However, the approaching headlights he had seen told him the tide of the battle was about to swing against the garou, and he wished to side with the winner. He then let loose with another salvo, making sure that every hit was only a flesh-wound. He wanted to make his participation look good, but he did not want to turn the tide of the battle by himself. He wanted Julian to earn his victory.

Schacter also noticed the approaching vehicles, and recognized them for what they represented. Knowing time was short, he resolved to do what he could to slow down anything that could stand in the way of the garou victory that seemed only moments away.

As James ripped into Daedalus' chest, seeking to remove the Nosferatu's heart, he was cut down by several shots from an M-16, fired from the front of a Mercedes that was racing up the drive. It was followed by two other cars. As the first two pulled up four men poured from each one, all armed with military issue weapons. The kindred from LA had arrived early, Julian realized. They may live through this night yet.

Within the third car, one of the Ventrue looked down in horror as the pin sprung from one of the grenades. It detonated, and the interior of the car, laden with Molotov cocktails, burst into flames as it neared the other two vehicles. One of the kindred managed to escape the flaming wreckage, but at that moment the gas tank burst, sending flaming gasoline all over his body, extinguishing him with fire.

"What would be the chances of that, do you think?" Schacter asked Yashida, who had just emerged into the clearing. The vampire started, unaware that the German had been standing in his path.

"You did that?" Johnny asked, gesturing to the burning Mercedes.

"It's what I do," Schacter replied. "I alter the probability of certain events within a complex system. It's a kind of magic. I think my allies have had enough help for now, though. I'm not sticking around with the Inquisition walking the grounds." He turned and left, his shadow dancing across the lawn as a result of the flames from the flaming wreck in the driveway.

"Damn," Dugan muttered from the shadows of the trees. "That one knows we're here. Kill him, Serge."

"No," Serge responded, leveling his crossbow. "That one is mortal. I'm going to kill the other one." He traced Johnny's silhouette against the fire as he spoke, knowing his aim had to be perfect, or at least within an inch of the desired target. Impaling a vampire's heart with a crossbow bolt was not the easiest task in the

world.

"The Inquisition?" Johnny asked Heinrich as he made his way back into the trees. "They're here?" As if in answer, he was struck in the chest with a crossbow bolt, impaling his heart and sending him into torpor, vulnerable to any attack the witch hunters felt like inflicting upon him.

Brother Dugan began to run across the grass toward the fallen kindred, knowing he would be able to finish it off before help could arrive. Serge and Father Nevin ran along behind him, Serge reloading the crossbow he had used to stake Yashida from a distance.

"We only have to cut off his head now, right?" Father Nevin asked as the closed the gap between themselves and Johnny.

"Yes," Dugan responded as he drew a cutlass from its scabbard on his hip.

"We could also set the body on fire," Serge added in a thick Italian accent. "But I guess there's no time for that."

Sasha sneaked around the side of the mansion, hoping to not get caught unaware by any stray garou. She heard talking from the lawn, and saw three men approaching a fallen figure, a crossbow bolt protruding from his chest. She realized immediately that the garou probably had help from these mortals, who appeared to be hunters. Brother Dugan was suddenly thrown to the ground in a spray of blood as a bullet tore through his chest. A split second later, Father Nevin's head was a mist, as Matt also dispatched of him from his perch on the roof. He counted his lucky stars for having realized in time that members of the Inquisition were attacking his sire. Sasha ran out to face Serge, who leveled his crossbow to dispatch of the Brujah. He never got a chance, though, as Matt decided to shoot him with the grenade launcher, ending the man's life in a blaze of light.

Sasha looked up toward the roof, to see who had helped her from above, and only caught the slight movement of a shadow carrying what appeared to be a large rifle across to the other side of the roof. She knelt down and removed the bolt from Yashida's heart, instantly bringing him back out of torpor. He looked up at Sasha and laughed. "I thought I was the one who was supposed to be watching over you," he said with a smile. He looked at the bodies around him, and nodded. "Thanks Matt, I owe you one."

"I know," the response came through the receiver in his ear from the roof. "Get to the front of the building. Luna might make it out, after all."

"Understood," Johnny responded as he began to race across the lawn, propelled by the strength in his blood faster than any mortal would have been able to move. Sasha raced off behind him, curious as to what exactly was going on in the front of the building, hoping she could help her uncle survive the night.

Just as Julian thought victory was assured with the arrival of the LA kindred, a thin garou jumped down from the roof right beside him, thrusting a wakizashi through Lillie's heart, sending her into torpor and taking her out of the fight. Mark had also arrived with Andrew

and Forgotten Teeth, all three of them full of fight after dispatching the remaining Gangrel and Brujah guards. They ran headlong into the LA kindred, aiming to stop them from being a part in the battle.

All three rushed headlong into a barrage of phosphorous shotgun rounds from Cyrus' enforcers, the shells burning their flesh, preventing regeneration any time in the near future. The three lupines fell back as quickly as they had initially attacked, racing around the corner of the mansion, being pursued by the eight kindred who now sensed victory.

In the front, Julian reacted to Kristen's attack quickly, blasting her through the stomach with a phosphorous round, exposing her vital organs to the outside world. She knocked the weapon from his hands, and he attacked her instead with his claws. Daedalus crawled over toward James' body, hoping to finish him off before the garou was able to regenerate from the damage done by the LA kindred with the M-16. As he got within arm's reach, however, Daedalus felt an intense chill on his back. He turned and saw Brother Venturi standing above him with a spear in his hands. It seemed to the Nosferatu that the mortal before him was glowing with an inner, holy light, although it seemed to cast no shadow. Daedalus felt a strange sensation " fear. He had heard of the effects of true faith upon the kindred, but he had never experienced it before. He was held transfixed, petrified by his terror. Brother Venturi raised the spear and impaled the Nosferatu through the heart, sending him into torpor, the death-like sleep of the kindred. He took a quick glance toward James, but the hunter ignored the garou for the time being and pulled a hatchet out from beneath the white cloak he was wearing, preparing to take Daedalus' head.

As he began to strike he was tackled by Johnny, who succeeded in knocking the hunter to the ground. Boland and Max moved to help their comrade from the Society of Leopold, but were set upon by Sasha. Neither of the men seemed too concerned with the approach of a single kindred, but their smug looks were erased with a pair of shots from the roof as Matt wounded each of the hunters. In response to the horror of seeing Daedalus apparently dead, and the thrill of knowing that the Nosferatu's attackers were vulnerable, Sasha released the beast within her, allowing herself to frenzy. She tore into the men with a dagger wielded by supernatural strength, cutting through bone, muscle, and sinew with the greatest of ease.

Venturi had been able to escape from underneath the smaller kindred, and rose to his feet, wielding his hatchet menacingly. Johnny pulled out his ninja-to in time to deflect the hatchet as it was swung expertly in his direction.

"Do you remember me, as I remember you, hunter?" Yashida began to taunt, shadows billowing out from his body. He knew full well that the last time he had encountered Venturi, he had been able to distract him through the manipulation of shadows. The priest had recognized the dark occult power for what it was " something that demonstrated the presence of pure evil.

"Devil kin!" Brother Venturi screamed in response, swinging the hatchet. While the attack was successfully parried, the force of the swing knocked the ninja-to from Johnny's hands, leaving him vulnerable to the next swing, which was cut off by a katana, wielded

by Rayce.

"I told you to keep an eye on her, not bring her into battle," Rayce shouted as he nodded towards Sasha, still raking at the bodies of the now long-dead Inquisitors. Rayce parried the next attack, and another, and seemed to gain speed as he fought. Johnny moved over to Sasha, trying to calm her out of her frenzy, but had little success. In the battle behind Johnny and Sasha, Rayce managed to find an opening, and slashed across the chest of his opponent, dropping him to the ground. He realized that Johnny would need time to calm Sasha down, and decided that he didn't have any time to offer to help. Instead, Rayce turned and headed back toward the front of the mansion.

"Oh, I don't have time for this," Johnny muttered as he turned away from Sasha. He could think of only one way to deal with the situation quickly. A few moments later, he was racing off across the lawn with Sasha over his shoulder running toward the garage. Johnny hoped to be able to hide until the battle was over. Any onlooker would have seen no further resistance being offered by the Brujah held over the Telmon's shoulder as he fled.

Julian, however, had no such luxury of having a hiding place. He felt his chest open up as Kristen slashed through the kevlar vest he was wearing, the body armor offering virtually no protection against her attack. Cash was busy with Looks Within, who was trying to get through the Gangrel's formidable melee defenses. Julian had paid top dollar to have his personal bodyguard trained in hand to hand combat, and that investment was now paying off. Cameron stood up, shaking off Looks Within's original attack, and struck at the Uktena from behind with a dagger, hoping to decrease the number of garou so that he could at least slip out of their view long enough to flee the battle. Despite his misgivings, he could not shake the feeling that the garou who had him had actually picked him out, as if it were the Brujah primogen that was the main target, rather than the prince. His thoughts were cut short, though, as James returned to the battle and knocked Cameron to the ground, intent on finishing off the reviled Brujah primogen

On the left side of the building, Mark, Andrew, and Natasha were cornered, backs against the wall of the mansion, surrounded by eight kindred, and bleeding profusely from the shotgun wounds. If left alone, they would most probably all die from the wounds they had already received, Mark knew that much. He also knew, however, that these kindred weren't going to just leave them to die. They would attack, and try to defeat these foes with the hand weapons they now wielded — baseball bats, swords, and knives. Mark growled, then roared. He knew his time had come, but he would never surrender to these agents of the Wyrms. He would resist to his last breath. The kindred attacked, one of them still holding a shotgun. Natasha was on the receiving end of the blast, and crumpled to the ground. "Retreat, Tasha," Andrew roared. "Retreat, I order you!" Despite the fact that Andrew was not old enough to order her, Natasha took off, knowing that she would not survive if she stayed. She was unwilling to throw her life away so freely.

Mark half-turned to Andrew, meaning to tear the Shadow Lord's throat out for calling a retreat. Instead he grinned as he saw the Shadow Lord continue the fight against the kindred, now moving toward Mark to go back to back with his alpha. It was then that it all made sense

to Mark. His own clan had praised itself for its strength, greatness born from a superior work ethic and constant trials. Here, though, was a Shadow Lord, the most untrusted of all the tribes, and he seemed unbothered that he would die here at the hands of the Wyrms along with this Get of Fenris warrior. Mark grinned as a sword slashed through his heart. He gripped the arm of the wielder and wrenched it out of the shoulder, killing one last foe. He heard Andrew howl behind him and knew that he was dead, but Mark was still happy. He knew then that when the Apocalypse finally arrived, all the tribes would rush into battle, just as Andrew had, and they would die in opposition to the Wyrms. As everything went black, Mark's final thought was that though the Wyrms won this round, he would be born again to defend Gaia, and next time he would kill even more of his enemies.

At the front door, Kristen finally collapsed as a result of Julian's attack, unable to take the punishment any longer. She turned her neck toward the prince, a sign of submission, and Julian simply collapsed next to her, unable to take the final swing that would have deprived her of her life. Cash was extremely bloodied, as was Looks Within. Cameron had been beaten down by James within a matter of seconds after the Fianna had regained his feet, but the garou was now facing off against Rayce, who had arrived to defend his primogen after realizing the fatal flaw with his plan. He now fought to maintain the status quo, to assure that the primogen who sat on the conclave at the beginning of the night would sit there still after this battle. No longer did he count on Julian dying, as he realized he had simply been overly ambitious. If he were lucky, the garou would still bury Cameron. However, Rayce decided that he would have to defend Luna, at least for the time being.

Rayce cut into his wolven opponent with his silver katana, causing James to howl in agony. Had the blade consisted of pure flame it would not have hurt as much, such was the strength of silver as a bane against the garou, akin to sunlight's effect on vampires. James rushed the Brujah, accepting another slash across the chest in exchange for the opportunity to overbear him, pinning him to the ground. Rayce realized almost immediately that he would not escape, and so diverted his attention to an alternate means of diverting his opponent's attention. Behind the garou the earth swelled up into a vaguely humanoid form which beset the garou before he could decapitate Rayce. Realizing that an elemental had been summoned once again, he released the vampire, hoping to find an alternate means of attack. From far off he heard the howl of Forgotten Teeth, the howl for a retreat. He saw the kindred come from around the side of the building, and knew that their alpha was dead. Mark would never have retreated or let an enemy survive a battle.

James darted away from Rayce as quickly as possible, up towards the front door of the mansion. Rayce, realizing Julian's vulnerability, gave chase. Despite the opportunity to kill the prince, though, James simply scooped up Kristen and began to run off as quickly as he could. Seeing his packmate flee, Looks Within broke off from Cash and also retreated, leaving the kindred for another day, another battle.

Rayce let his elemental fall back into the earth, knowing no one had even seen him work one of his more powerful abilities. He removed the spear from Daedalus' back, and removed the sword from Lillie's chest. They all then got the survivors of the night back into the mansion.

Jeffrey and Cassandra, both of whom had stayed inside, were alive. Julian and Sonny were the only other two Ventrue remaining in the city, as Sonny had not even been on the grounds for the battle. Cameron was still intact, as was Rayce, but no other Brujah were to be accounted for. Lillie and Shane, a blood brother to her, were the only Toreador left alive, and Cash constituted the entire population of the Gangrel. Of course, the Nosferatu had all survived, being unwilling to ever engage in a war. As Julian looked around, he felt an extreme emptiness. A week ago this had been a city supporting over sixty of his kind, not including the countless Nosferatu underneath in the sewers. Now there were only nine, plus the pacifist Nosferatu.

"Where is Sasha?" Julian gasped, realizing that his niece was not in the mansion. "Has anyone seen her? I thought I saw her fighting one of the hunters."

"She's with Yashida," Rayce answered. "He took her someplace safe."

Almost on cue, a bloody Johnny and Sasha walked into the doorway. Sasha ran into Julian's arms, and wound up supporting a great portion of his weight, as he was unable to even stand. Matt appeared in the doorway behind Johnny, and Yashida spoke up. "Julian, this is my childe, Matt. He aided me in saving Sasha from the garou. He wishes to present himself."

"You are welcome in my city," Julian gasped, irritated that Yashida had undertaken the presentation at that inopportune moment. Julian would have like to have learned more, but didn't have the strength for interrogations at the time.

The sirens could be heard from far off, and Jeffrey went outside with Rayce, to aid the LA kindred in cleaning up the mess left by the battle. Regardless of anything else, the Masquerade would have to be maintained.

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VI

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"Why did we run?" Looks Within demanded. Natasha just glared at him in response.

"Yeah, Tasha," James questioned. "We could still have won."

Natasha brought James into her vision along with Looks Within. Only Kristen did not speak against her, not that that fact said a great deal. The Glass Walker was hovering on death's doorstep. Natasha let Kristen sit there for the time being. Though the wounds would have killed a human, they did no more than incapacitate their packmate, and that condition would be temporary. She would be able to fight again in a few days.

"You will not question me, James," Natasha answered angrily, speaking up for the second time that night. "I am your elder, and you will accept my command, unless, of course, you wish to challenge." The words took James completely by surprise. None had ever known Natasha

to be assertive in any way. The word 'challenge' had never even been spoken in the same sentence as her name. Suddenly, however, she seemed willing to do whatever it took to justify her actions.

"No, I will not challenge you," James replied. He was afraid of what the challenge would be. He was certain that combat would not be chosen, as he was relatively healthy, while Natasha was still bleeding from a shotgun wound to her side. Even so, he doubted she could defeat him even if she were healthy. He decided that a games challenge would probably follow, and he had no desire to try to match wits with an insane Silver Fang.

"Since you do not challenge, I need only justify my actions to Looks Within," Natasha said, turning to the pack's shaman. "I was ordered by Andrew to retreat."

"His commands were not binding on you," Looks Within replied, stating what he realized Natasha already knew. "Only Mark and I had authority in this pack to give you an order."

"I know, but I chose to obey, all the same," Natasha shot back, not liking the tone in Looks Within's voice. She did not feel he was accusing her of anything. He almost sounded as if he already understood her reasons, and that fact made the Silver Fang feel creepy. She did not like the apparent omniscience of Looks Within.

"Coward!" James interjected. "A song of your cowardice shall be sung along with any dirge that praises the bravery of Mark and Andrew as they fell to the Wyrms."

"I told you to be quiet, whelp!" Tasha shot back venomously. "The order was the correct one," she stated, addressing everyone in the room. "As James said, we could have won, but we would probably have all been killed in the process. Perhaps one or two of us would have survived. That is unacceptable."

"Why?" Looks Within asked. His tone had become inquisitive, and Natasha felt as though she were being tested. She knew that Looks Within was searching for a particular answer, and she had no idea what it was. She decided to simply answer with her heart, feeling that if she were to be damned, it would be because of something she truly felt.

"If just one of the kindred in the city survived, and one always does, they would have had the entire city repopulated within a year," Natasha said, beginning her explanation. "Meanwhile, it would take us years to train a new pack of garou to face this threat. They need only one night to select a neonate, while we need to rely on an extremely recessive gene to create a garou. We are far rarer than they are, and therefore we can no longer throw our lives away in fighting the Wyrms."

"So what do you suggest?" Looks Within asked, looking pleased with Natasha's line of logic.

"Only that we think when we act, or risk going extinct," Forgotten Teeth answered, no longer seeming shy about being in a position of power. "Too much depends on us winning our war."

"Absolutely," Looks Within answered. "I will follow you."

"What?" Natasha asked.

"Our alpha is dead, we need another," Looks Within replied, stating the facts. "Besides, it is the prophecy." Everyone in the room turned to the old shaman, expecting an immediate explanation of what prophecy he was referring to.

"Mark said something about a prophecy back when we were planning this whole thing, but never explained what he meant," Natasha retorted. "What is it you're talking about?"

Looks Within looked at Natasha for a moment, then diverted his attention to his other two surviving packmates. He then decided to speak. "There was a prophecy that on a night of an eclipse, with a shooting star held still in the sky, a pack of garou representing six different tribes would go on a quest for vengeance. From that pack would emerge an alpha that would change the way many garou would view the war against the Wyrms, and these alternative methods will meet with success."

"And you think that's me?" Natasha asked, almost incredulous. She had suddenly lost the glow of confidence that she had had only moments earlier. There was, after all, a huge difference between taking temporary control of the pack, and actually becoming its new alpha. She could not even consider being some great leader of all the garou. Everything was coming at her too quickly. "Looks Within, I'm no leader," Forgotten Teeth continued. "I never wanted to be a leader. Hell, until tonight I never even said more than a sentence at a time." Natasha began to get more and more excited.

"Many say that the Silver Fang have descended into madness, and I used to think that you fit this stereotype," Looks Within stated, not caring that he offended his new alpha. "Now I see that that you are not mad, but only enlightened. Some say there is little difference between the two, but I believe that one exists within you. You should lead us."

"What if the prophecy is wrong?" she asked, trying to prevent herself from having to take responsibility for the lives of her packmates. Her fear of failure began to grow within her once again.

"The prophecy is not wrong, Mark was wrong," Looks Within replied flatly. "He thought he was the leader that would emerge, and that we would take a more militant view towards the Wyrms, but that was obviously not meant to be. You are to lead this pack, and later, by example, many other garou."

"You sound like we're going to become peaceniks," James said in disgust. "How am I supposed to write epic songs of the great garou pacifists?"

"No," Looks Within responded, looking up to the sky as if the stars themselves could lend to him the wisdom of the ages. "We will not become pacifists, we will become strategists. No longer will we rush mindlessly into battle, destroying all we can. We will be calculating, as our enemy is. If we use our brains, our brawn will undoubtedly win out."

"Ok," Natasha answered. "I can see where this is going." Natasha felt the glow of confidence return to her once again, as suddenly as it had disappeared only moments earlier. She was as sure as Looks Within was that it was her destiny to lead her pack. "I accept leadership of the pack," she said with a grim look on her face. "Let it be known that I am no longer Forgotten Teeth. I will now be called Claws of Wisdom, and I will use the wisdom passed on to me by the Uktena to lead this pack to new levels of glory. Do any wish to challenge my claim?" She looked at James as she spoke, but he did not respond.

Natasha led them to the edge of Golden Gate Park, where they had been having their meeting, and got into her car. As she did so, James looked at her, and wondered at the songs that would one day be sung about her. He had no doubt that Looks Within would prove to be correct, that the garou would come to a new understanding of warfare, led by Claws of Wisdom. One question remained, though "would Natasha live long enough to see them come to this new way of thought, leaving behind the old ways of unplanned mayhem? James was unsure. The changing of the ways of the garou was a long process, and carried with it dangers of its own.

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VI

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Johnny sat in his apartment, downing the last of a bucket of KFC when he heard a knock at the door. Going over, he found Rayce standing outside. "Can I come in?" the Brujah asked.

"Absolutely," Johnny answered. "There are some things I can't wait to find out."

"Such as?" Rayce asked, a broad smile on his face. Johnny could see that many things had worked out for his friend, though they did not all go exactly as planned.

"Why did you change your mind in the middle of the battle?" Johnny asked quickly. Before Rayce could answer, though, he had proceeded on to the matter that confused him most. "Why side with the prince?" Yashida inquired. "You could have had them all wiped out if you hadn't fought off that garou. The battle hinged on your decision, and you went the opposite way from what you said you were going to." Johnny sat back on the couch, opening the Styrofoam container holding the mashed potatoes.

Rayce simply looked in disgust at his friend eating, then began. "I saw the kindred that Cyrus sent, and realized that they were well trained in combat. If Julian ever fell, Cyrus would probably come looking to replace him. I wouldn't have been able to hold him off by myself. Besides, even if Cyrus didn't show up, there are anarchists in Oakland who would have. Come on, you were able to get a gang of them over here with just a few words about Julian being weakened. If Julian died, this city would become an anarchist haven. It would be like New Orleans "completely out of control."

"This way I at least will definitely be the number two man in the Brujah, and I'll be able to help repopulate the clan. Cameron is

smarter than Fiori, but he'll still push Julian too far someday. Then I'll get to take over. From there it's only one step to being prince."

"That's a long step," Johnny answered. "Besides, you'll have some competition."

"What do you mean? You?" Rayce looked at Johnny in disbelief.

"No, not me," Yashida replied, seeming relieved. "I hate this politics stuff," Johnny added with a sheepish grin. Rayce, of all people, knew exactly how much of a manipulator Johnny Yashida could be. He simply figured that Johnny was not yet willing to settle down in any one place for very long. "Besides," Johnny continued, "I have a Gangrel friend in New Orleans that's gonna be pretty pissed that I just ran off, and I have to get back to her. Matt is gonna be staying, though."

"Matt?" Rayce asked, surprised. "He's just a childe."

"No, I have officially released him," Johnny replied. Julian heard about Matt whacking the Inquisition guys, and knows that Matt probably saved all the primogen when he started pumping bullets into the garou from his spot on the roof. He was impressed, and grateful. Julian gave him a seat on the conclave, to sit as primogen of clan Telemon. He actually received permission to embrace two childer. Julian even has him taking over as his personal bodyguard, giving Cash a chance to repopulate his clan." Johnny shook his head in apparent disbelief, wondering how hard Julian had been hit during the fight to let an unknown entity get close to him.

"Wow, lot's of changes," Rayce commented. "I have a question for you, though."

"What is it?" Johnny asked.

"How did you calm Sasha down?" Rayce asked. "She was in a fit of frenzy, completely out of control, and she won't tell anyone what you did."

"Yeah, I bet she won't," Johnny replied with a sly grin. "It would suck for her if other people started doing the same thing."

"What?" Rayce asked, unable to hide his curiosity.

"I staked her with my ninja-to," Johnny replied with a shrug.

"You did what?" Rayce asked, a shocked look on his face.

"Well, I had to get out of there, the garou was getting up," Johnny replied, trying to get his friend to remember the situation. "Besides, she didn't resist much when she was in torpor. It worked like a charm."

"You're a sick man, Johnny, and you're lucky she didn't tell anyone. Julian would have had our head," Rayce said only half-seriously. He figured it was actually more likely that the prince would have had paid Johnny to teach the mansion's staff exactly where to stab Sasha in the future to calm her down.

"Julian would have to catch me before he could hurt me," Johnny responded, "and I'm leaving town in just a few minutes. You were actually lucky to catch me." He threw the empty styrofoam container into the trash can, and then looked at Rayce with an inquisitive eye. "One more question, though."

"Shoot."

"Who are you, really, Rayce?" Johnny asked. "You're not like any damn Brujah I ever met."

"No, I guess not," Rayce replied proudly. "But that, my friend, is a question for another day."

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VII

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Caitlin sat in the Haven, sipping her customary red wine. As she looked around she realized that many of the usual customers were not present, and wondered if that had any connection to the fact that both Lillie and Julian had seen so much trouble lately. After a couple of minutes of more waiting, she saw Julian finally enter, conspicuously without Cash, the bodyguard that Caitlin had become somewhat acquainted with. In his stead there was now a rather large man with a military haircut, wearing a jacket that only partially concealed the MP5 underneath.

"Good evening, Caitlin," Julian said as smoothly as ever.

"It's nice to see you out again," she responded, thinking how little he seemed affected by what had apparently been going on around him for the past week.

"I wasn't going to stay inside while you were out here," he responded coyly. Matt, satisfied that Caitlin posed no threat, grabbed a waitress and ordered some beer and nachos, and sat down in a booth a few feet away from Julian.

"Who's the new guy?" Caitlin asked once Matt had walked away. "Nothing happened to Cash, did it?" Her concern was so sincere that Julian was surprised.

"No, Cash is fine," Julian said with a smile. "He just needs time to look into some business matters of his own. Matt there has been promoted to head of security for me, at least for the time being." Julian gave a quick look at the Telemon, and hoped that his decision had been wise. With the decimation of the city's kindred, there would be a need for enforcers of the prince's edicts. The Telemon seemed perfect for the job. Giving Matt Reimer the added responsibility of security for the prince would keep him busy enough to not scheme behind Julian's back, and would also keep him close enough for Julian to see what the Telemon were really like. Luna had heard several positive things about the clan from back east, but he needed to decide for himself. _Well_, the prince thought, _as the saying says, keep your friends close, but your enemies closer._

"Where'd you meet him?" Caitlin asked.

"Why do you keep avoiding the questions you want to ask?" Julian countered, not wanting to have to get into details about his new bodyguard. There were far more pleasurable topics of conversations as far as he was concerned.

"Ok," she answered. "What exactly has been going on, Julian? I've heard some crazy stories."

"I can imagine," he answered. "You should hear some of the stories that I heard." He smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "You remember Cameron, right?"

"How could I forget?" Caitlin asked. Indeed, lately Cameron's name seemed to keep popping up in places that her contacts had once reserved for the mobster Eddie Fiori.

"From what we've been able to figure out, a competitor of Cameron's once did something extremely vile, and people close to the event wrongly concluded it had been Cameron that had ordered this particular act." Julian thought about the letter that he had received, from an anonymous source, which explained why the garou had been coming after Cameron. Unfortunately, there had been no way to relay the facts supporting Cameron's innocence, and Julian knew that one day the garou may return to finish the job they had begun.

"What exactly was this vile act?" Caitlin asked, her curiosity evident in her expression.

"I do not like to speak of crimes of this magnitude," Julian responded. "Just understand that it was particularly wicked. Cameron and I share a few isolated business interests, and he came to me for help. I guess it was perceived that I was actively aiding him, and I became involved in the crossfire. Unfortunately, many people I know were killed as a result, and a lot of my property was damaged."

"So I've heard," Caitlin said, nodding. "It's all over now?" she asked, already knowing that Julian would lie to reassure her if he thought it would help the situation, but she still needed to hear him say it. She had to hear the words so that she could sleep better that night. She also needed to know whether she could permit herself to keep getting closer to this man that seemed to attract so much violence and intrigue.

"I wouldn't have come anywhere near you unless I knew for sure that it was safe," Julian answered. Deep down, he hoped that indeed it was all over. The garou had been expelled from the city, but there was always the threat of a return, and there were weakened defenses within San Francisco. Beyond the threat of the garou, there was always the possibility that the Sabbat truly would show up, trying to take advantage of the opening that was made for them as a result of the recent conflict. There were also the ever-present anarch gangs of California. Not to be forgotten, Julian thought, was also the possibility of another prince trying to add San Francisco to his territory. While it was doubtful that Cyrus would try, having already lost several of his best soldiers, there were others who might make a move. Only time will tell, Julian pondered as he gazed into Caitlin's eyes, whether or not we have truly won this particular war.

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Fin

(For now)

****Additional Note:**** This is where I request that you, the reader, review this fic (so I know if it has any value at all). It was originally filed in the White Wolf section (under Games), but I recently moved it here, since it may be more appropriate in this section. Anyway, this is episode 1 of a series. If you liked what you saw here, I would suggest you check out the next installment, 'Friends and Foes,' which is still in the Games/White Wolf section, along with the other three sequels. Thanks.

End
file.